



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Master's Degree in International Relations - Global Studies

Chair in History of International Relations

Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion Between Military Strategies and the Steered Political Perception

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ACADEMIC YEAR 2017/2018

A mio padre, in memoriam

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to convey my sincere thanks to my advisor Prof. Maria Elena Cavallaro for the continuous support to my thesis and related research, for having motivated me to deeply dig into the topic, which I have been interested in since the middle school, prompting me to exploit my knowledge of Russian language.

My deepest thought and thanks go to my father. Not having been accompanied by his presence during these two years of the master's degree has revealed to be the most hurting experience. Not having him for my dissertation is even harder.

But I strain to convince myself that material distance does not mean much if I concentrate on feeling him still close to me. I am sure he is proud and would weep with joy, as he did almost three years ago when he put the laurel wreath on my head.

So, daddy, this thesis is for you. Miss you so much.

My mother deserves a profound thank you, for having encouraged me to hold my head up again and for having given me the courage to get on with my university exams, without surrounding to sorrow. She has been the boost to resume the concentration when my mind wandered. She has been able to convince me that I am still on time to plan a bright future.

And then, there is my grandmother. The strongest person I ever met. She has always been near me, when I was desperate and hopeless, when I just needed some words of comfort. She has known how to convince me that there is always a way out and I am very grateful to her.

Last, but not least, I would like to dedicate few lines to Alessandro. Probably he is the one who has seen my worst moments. He never backed off and has been the most important presence, without which I would have not been capable of smiling again. He made me laugh when I only wanted to cry loud, he calmed down my anxieties when I felt unable to see past the present.

He made me felt his believing in me and emboldened me to do the same. Probably, without him I would get bogged down, lacking in willpower. I have to thank him for his persevering support, for his fond embraces and reproaches, when necessary. This thesis is even the outcome of his gentle involvement in my daily life. Therefore, thanks.

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Abstract

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a crucial event in the late seventies, giving the input for a ten-year war. The peculiarity of the struggle, that constitutes the main core of this dissertation, concerns the employment and the exploitation of propaganda as an effective military strategy, mainly by the Soviet Union.

The focus will be on the informative clash as a complementary element of the military battles. The USSR, through veiled messages, leaflets and “dis-informative” articles, aimed at increasing its political authority worldwide, steering the construction of a positively perceived image, nationally and internationally supported and honoured. Propaganda was considered an essential approach to undermine the profile of the enemies, in order to limit the Afghan people’s approval and espousal of the Islamic cause.

What derived was an actual war of information, since the answer to Soviet propaganda was just as tough. In fact, the anti-Soviet propaganda was highly successful in damaging the Soviet Union as a political-ideological system that, partly as a consequence, collapsed two years after the inescapable withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

By analysing the historic event pattern, it will emerge the substance of the Soviet-Afghan War. It was a last-ditch effort of the USSR to protect its own sphere of influence in the Third World. However, because of the backing of the United States and Pakistan, acting as an intermediary for the redistribution of weapons, the local Islamic extremist rebels, named mujahidin, prevented a Soviet rapid victory. Indeed, in conjunction with the mujahidin’s whole knowledge of the mountainous areas around Kabul and the support of the rural Afghan population, the Soviet Union was forced to abandon its initial intent.

Such military defeat, together with the propaganda debacle, led to a loss of credibility of Soviet Union as a political-ideological giant.

Introduction

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 is a founding event of the recent past, whose consequences are still maintaining a strong relationship with today's reality.

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the peculiarity of the Soviet-Afghan War that started as a direct consequence of the aforementioned military offensive and that was transformed into an informative war, rather than an armed struggle. The focus will be mainly around the Soviet propagandistic actions that largely influenced the evolution of the conflict but concentrating over the fundamental role propaganda had in presenting the Soviet Union, and all the involved parties, from a three-dimensional side, regarding the political, social and ideological fields. The aim of the informative war was not limited to win the war in Afghanistan, but involved further targets, perfectly coinciding with the broader surrounding atmosphere, characterised by a lack of reciprocal confidence and a race to the political-ideological supremacy. Therefore, the thesis will be addressed towards the analysis of the propagandistic dominant and persuasive role in the strengthening of the national and international political position and, in a more generalised sense, of the image the Soviet Union managed to achieve, steering the diffusion of information and news, concerning its actions.

The result would be a comprehensive perspective of the way the Soviet Union adopted to sell the Afghan war and of the immediate and more intrinsic outcomes deriving from such war of information.

The war itself marked a crucial step within the Soviet-American Cold War, representing both the conclusion of the period of détente, term referring to a ten-year relaxation of tensions between the two superpowers, and the beginning of the defeat of the Soviet Union as a system. The main question, as regards the military operation, would arise concerning the reasons that led Brezhnev to decide for invading. Effectively, the actuation of the offensive attack would not only be addressed towards the Afghan rebels, the counter-communist revolutionaries mujahidin, but, following the American perspective, even against the United States themselves. The American response was a violent counteroffensive, directly and indirectly supporting the mujahidin through the provision of weapons, military trainings and economic subsidies. The immediate outcome was a rapid worsening of the bilateral Soviet-American relationship, as it could be easily expected.

Therefore, the historic background of the 1970s would represent a fundamental starting point to explore the various aspects of the destructive “verdict” of assault against Afghan rebel militants – destructive since the Soviet Union would be forced to withdraw from Afghanistan exactly ten years later, in 1989.

The logic and the reasoning that convinced the USSR to proceed with the invasion have to be found even within its bilateral relations with Afghanistan itself, spotlighting the latter's internal situation and the imminent danger of the spreading of guerrillas against the Leninist-Marxist oriented government, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Besides being a filo-Soviet regime, it was a sort of puppet government that the Soviet Union would not easily abandon.

The role of the Intelligence Services was of primary importance for the duration of the war. The Soviet KGB, actuating the operation Storm 333 for the invasive plan, and the American CIA, answering with the expensive Cyclone operation, performed two basic and main characters. In this sense, any strategic or evaluative mistake revealed to be fatal, since the planning of the military strategies to be followed were, largely, planned by the respective agencies.

The peculiarity of the Soviet-Afghan War, in fact, partly resided in the adoption and choice of the warfare, that was not simply based on military operations and methodical incursions, but embraced the psychological sphere, through influential propagandistic activities. Propaganda, besides being an important instrument to gain the support of the civilian population, was employed by all the factions involved within the struggle as an additional and supportive military method to undermine the enemies.

The function of propaganda was essential to determine and depict Soviet's own political image. The propagandistic aims varied during the course of the war, since, parallel with the change of the General Secretaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, policies and politico-ideological visions reshaped too. Brezhnev was more interested in spreading less information concerning Afghanistan, in order to preserve domestic social cohesion and confidence towards the *Rodina mat'*, that means motherland in Russian, whereas, Gorbachev, in the mid to late 80s, claimed for more transparency and public inclusion into the Soviet affairs.

Accordingly, the intrinsic end was to honour the name of the Soviet Union, guiding the formation of a positive political perception from the outside. The defence of the Soviet public image took place on a number of fronts.

Domestically, the direction was to gain the respect and full trust of the population, as to avoid any popular agitation and not to lose public consensus that, in a period of economic stagnation and industrial productive backwardness, like the 70s and 80s were, was indispensable to avoid internal crises and consequent unrests. Popular approval towards the political system, and the ideological annexed one, was, in Soviet view, the only basic element to preserve the existence and the integrity of the Soviet entity. The leadership's common position would remain constant, but, due to global progression and irrepressible financial mutation, increasingly addressed towards privatisation and independent economic claims, propaganda would continue to pursue its aim of cohesiveness and

adherence to the political bureau in charge. It would transform into an instrument of exposition of popular will and pleas, rather than remaining an autocratic expression of the government needs. Internationally, the prominence that propaganda had for the Soviet Union was not limited to the structuring of a stable and fixed order, but it became a proper practice to subdue the Western counterparts, exhibiting moral superiority and power. The game of the Cold War included the race for the more ideologically and politically influential country; therefore, a plain presentation of the Soviet respected dynamic potential was a functional channel.

Concerning the case of Afghanistan, the purpose of propaganda was dual, both to receive the blessing of local inhabitants in order to make the Soviet troops greatly accepted and welcomed hosts, and to prove the legality of the Soviet armed interference.

Whatever the dominant purpose was, the structured Soviet propaganda gave the input for an actual informative war that did not conclude neither with the definitive departure of the troops of the Red Army from Kabul and the surrounding area.

The effectiveness of the steered political propaganda, implemented by communication means, and mainly by the Soviet central press, diffusing anti-mujahidin leaflets and publishing articles showing the greatness of the positive results achieved in the battles against Afghanistan, would be strongly limited by anti-Soviet publicity. The American advertising campaign to undermine the global position and reputation of the USSR would reveal effective and, thanks to the support of Pakistan, acting as an ally of the United States and being a channel between them and the Afghan mujahidin, would largely influence the progress of the war.

Thus, the weight of propaganda was not marginal. On the contrary, it was a concrete co-element within the conflict. Therefore, the Soviet-Afghan conflict was a war even fought for the sake of appearances, perfectly depicting the cohesive approach of the macro Cold War, falling within the ideological struggle for the supremacy.

In order to analyse the guiding task of the propagandistic battle, highlighting the techniques and schemes of diffusion of news regarding the situation in Afghanistan and the plausible scenario, the theme would be presented following a methodology based on a twofold approach: the historic and the socio-political perspective one.

First, in order to determine the background and the consecution of the events, the invasion in Afghanistan by the Soviet Union will be introduced according to the historical chronological order, starting with the relaxation of relations between the USSR and the US. The existing literature will be explored to deeply understand Brezhnev's reasoning at the base of the decision of meddling in the Afghan domestic affairs, with the consequent re-deterioration of bilateral contacts with the United States over the 1980s.

Second, as the following step of the historical review, bilateral relations between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan itself will be spotlighted, investigating on the precedents of the incursion, on the plans for the invasion and their putting into operation, on the expected results and the concrete ones.

Third, more concerning the socio-political approach, the internal-Soviet review of communication and propagandistic features and strategies will be examined, with the aim of showing that, and how, propaganda has become part of the Soviet military strategy in Afghanistan to intimidate the counter-revolutionaries mujahidin, and the way it continued to prospect a still going peaceful and serene living to Soviet people.

Fourth, the analysis will focus on the American counter-propaganda and the effects it had over Soviet reputation, favouring its collapse in 1991.

The division of the chapters will approximatively follow the methodological structure.

The first chapter of this thesis will concern the deployment of policies and agreements to reach an improved and friendly link between the Soviet Union, under Brezhnev, and the United States, under the presidency of Nixon. The formulation of the *détente* is a necessary phase to be examined, since it will give the perception of the polarised world during the Cold War and of the instability and uncertainty of the achieved accords. In the background of the *détente*, arose a foreign policy doctrine, the Brezhnev Doctrine, that will partly give an explication to the superficial incentives for occupying Afghanistan, in the light of an extensive turnover in the Soviet geopolitical objectives, seeking to ideologically conquer the Third World.

The second chapter will focus on the close liaison of the Soviet Union with Afghanistan. The Afghan history will be pondered for the purpose of understanding why the USSR was deeply interested in Afghanistan and in the preservation of the latter's internal stability, and how the Soviets undetected infiltrated in the capital city Kabul.

It will be fundamental to pore over the Afghan past historical events before the incursion by the Soviet soldiers, to figure out the grounds behind the establishment of the communist regime, transforming Afghanistan from a monarchy into a democratic republic (DRA). The arising of anti-communist guerrillas and the naissance of Islamic radical rebels will be judged as a threat to national Afghan security and to the government as well. Consequently, the Soviet Union intervened not to allow a political reversal.

The third chapter will concentrate on the functioning of the Soviet propaganda apparatus and network. The mass media employed to spread information and to communicate with the public, the pre-established intentions and the driven news, accurately pinpointed by the censorship of the USSR, were the major complementary military strategy. The chain-linked steps followed by the propagandistic expression would be scrutinised, passing from the first phase of Soviet propaganda,

based on a total negation of any Soviet intervention, even coinciding with the first years of the Soviet-Afghan War, to the extending of the *glasnost* policy into the propagandistic coverage about the running of the struggle. Subsequently, the chapter would explore the different implementations of the mass transmission means, underlining the variation in the preference and choice of the specific tactic to spread information. Existing numerous channels of communication, such as the press, the radio, the television and the printed leaflets, the Soviet censorship pinpointed the most effective, selecting one or another to the expediency of the moment and depending upon the recipients of the messages.

The conclusive results and eventual impediments will be scanned with a view to clarify the elemental and peculiar reasons that made propaganda an element sine qua non the Soviet Politburo, the KGB and the military commanders would not run the war. The conclusion of the third chapter should give the reader an overview of the functioning of the Soviet propaganda both during the early and the late '80s, of the propagandistic shift complementary to the political conversion, mainly between Brezhnev and Gorbachev, and of the ideological echo the propaganda managed to achieve and diffuse at national and international levels.

The fourth and last chapter of this dissertation will integrate the foreign political perception of the Soviet intervention and, more generally, the picture the USSR had gained abroad, compared to the national one. It will concern the anti-Soviet forms of propaganda, considering the mujahidin's and American coverage of the Soviet offensive against Afghanistan and its inhabitants, highlighting the outcomes and the consequences for the USSR.

Furthermore, the political perception of the war will be related to modern days, since the end of the conflict in 1989 until nowadays, emphasising the strong emotional impact it caused over the population and the continuous metamorphosis of perceptions by civilian third parties.

In conclusion, the last paragraph will give a short and quick glance to the concrete social, economic, political and ideological aftermaths, partly directly deriving from the Soviet-Afghan War and the way it concluded, that brought to the definitive collapse of the Soviet Union as a leading world superpower and to its consequent split within several independent republics.

Chapter 1

The Path Towards the Soviet Invasion in Afghanistan: USSR - US bilateral relations in the 1970s

1.1 A brief introduction. In pursuit of Détente: the mid-to-late 1960s

The mid-to-late 60s embodied, worldwide, a term of raising hostilities. It was a period dominated by major antagonisms between India and Pakistan, clashing in 1965, between Israel and the Arab Egypt, Jordan and Syria in the Six-Day War of 1967, and by the war in Vietnam.

In China, the Cultural Revolution, set in motion in 1966 in order to re-examine communist identity, brought confusion and uncertainty, leading the country to a state of extreme isolation. The situation itself worsened up to erupt, in 1969, with a deep border collision between China and the Soviet Union.

In 1968, in Czechoslovakia, the attempt to ease the Communism in force terminated with Soviet tanks shattering hopes and devastating Prague.¹ One of the Soviet pretexts was justified by the pointing out that Western Germans, in conspiracy with their NATO allies, were devising to overturn Czechoslovakia itself.²

Insecurity, fear, instability and uneasiness reigned, but they would sow the seeds of the forthcoming détente,³ initiated two years later, in August 1970, through the signing of a treaty upon the renunciation of the use of force between the Soviet Union and West Germany. The latter granted the inviolability of borders in existence in Eastern Europe, primarily of the Oder-Neisse line, the boundary line separating East Germany and Poland.⁴

The importance of this treaty resided in its being part of a larger effort and urged to seek a wider détente with the West in its whole.

1.2 The Détente

Détente, in the vocabulary of international politics, means the cessation of a military tense atmosphere in inter-state relations for the purpose of open bilateral friendly correspondences.

¹ Stephen R. Ashton, *In Search of Detente: The Politics of East-West Relations since 1945* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989), 105.

² "Detente in Europe?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 5, no. 33 (August 1970): 1360, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4360313>.

³ A French word meaning release from tensions, especially in a political situation. *Détente*, as it is employed in this thesis, indicates the appellative of the period 1967-1979, years during which Cold War hostilities between the Soviet Union and the United States eased, in the name of reciprocal cooperation.

⁴ Ashton, *In Search of Detente*, 112.

In the framework of the Cold War, the term is referred to the period included between the end of the 1960s and 1979, year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, marking the conclusion of the “pacific rivalry” of Soviet Union and the United States.

The concept of détente is often associated with President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) and Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State under Nixon’s Presidency and even his national security advisor.

However, none of them was its author, since détente is a French term, having its roots in a German newspaper that employed the word to herald the visit of a British monarch. Originally, it was proposed to bridge the gap in Anglo-German bond, between the existing antagonism in economic and military interests and the entente, implying a certain degree of collaboration.⁵

In Soviet-American discourse, President Nixon was the first to make use of the word “détente” to describe his foreign policy, founding on comprehensive co-being and relaxation of frictions between the Soviet Union and the United States, focusing more on the importance of coexistence than on the aim of transformation.⁶

Foreign policy of the United States, since World War II, has been usually marked by the following of several Presidents determining their own doctrines. The latest doctrine related to American foreign policy can be recognised in the same figure of President Nixon, inaugurating a “new era of international negotiations”.

Its main aim consisted of the normalisation of agreements, seeking to end excessive and exaggerated hostilities, in order to create new relations.⁷ Nixon declared that the United States could better reach their interests through negotiations, rather than confrontation, recognising in agreements themselves a fundamental role as stabilisers of international peace. The Nixon Doctrine attempted to demonstrate that the two superpowers, the US and the USSR, could collaborate and mutually fraternise, in order to continue being the strongest and most influent military powers but in a multipolar world, in which even smaller and weaker states could freely manoeuvre.

Conflicts, the most of them, would occur in non-military spheres, in order to avoid a direct armed face-off, since, during an era of high nuclear vulnerability, the importance of negotiations and of the negotiating process itself became imperative.

The most zealous advocate of the Nixon doctrine was Kissinger. He had always criticised excessive American obsession and fixation with Soviet internal political system, claiming for more conciliation with the same Soviet Union, in the name of an increase of self-security through

⁵ Richard J. Crampton, *The Hollow Detente: Anglo-German Relations in the Balkans 1911-1914* (London: George Prior, 1980).

⁶ Michael B. Froman, *The Development of the Idea of Détente: Coming to Terms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1991), 37-41.

⁷ Barbara N. McLennan, “Implications of the Nixon Doctrine for American International Negotiations,” *Il Politico* 39, n. 4 (December 1974): 553-556, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43207822>.

negotiations. The importance of both superpowers should dwell in their own ability and skilfulness in promoting unilateral steps to encourage international stability.

He anticipated the need of re-determine some schedules, such as non-proliferation treaties, surprise attacks and the ban of nuclear tests,⁸ already in his book “The Necessity for Choice”, published in 1960.

On January 20, 1969, Richard Nixon assumed the Presidency, in a moment in which the United States were facing several challenges, raising main questions about their role in international world affairs. Domestically, the Vietnam War⁹ aroused polemics that would affect American foreign policy consensus; abroad, the Soviet Union was reaching nuclear parity and heightening its influence over the Third World. By 1969, in addition, both the USSR and the US claimed the capability for MAD, mutual assured destruction, realising their mutual vulnerability to annihilation, in the case of a nuclear attack.¹⁰ In a delicate equilibrium, with a growing of foreign policy questions, parallel with a decline in American economic and political resources, fundamental to face those issues, détente seemed to be a useful means to restrain USSR’s foreign policy by boosting itself to contain.¹¹

The American government, differently from Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and his “selling” of détente within the Soviet Union, perceived it as a static process, able to limit Soviet expansion and to control the arms race. The evidence showed an inclination of the United States to reckon détente as a sort of bilateral contract, suggesting the Soviet counterpart’s acceptance of an obedience of shared priorities, that is an international system in the name of stability and peace.¹²

Conversely, after the fall of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, the Soviet Union asked for a renewal of military and political hardliners, claiming for the need of maintaining the capability of waging and winning a hypothetical nuclear war, in case it was not preventable.¹³ However, the emergence of

⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

⁹ The Vietnam War lasted since 1954 to 1975. It was an extended conflict fought by the government of South Vietnam and its main ally, the United States, against the communist government of North Vietnam and its allies in the South Vietnam, known with the appellative of Viet Cong. The war, even called the “American War in Vietnam”, or the “War against the Americans to save the Nation”, was even an important manifestation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, respectively supporting their own allies. In 1975, three years after the American withdrawal of troops, South Vietnam was completely invaded by North Vietnam. See: Ronald H. Spetor, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Vietnam War” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War>.

¹⁰ Anatolij F. Dobrynin, “Memorandum of the conversation of A. F. Dobrynin, Ambassador of the USSR to the USA with Kissinger, 12 July 1969”, in *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 3, by James G. Hershberg (Washington: Wilson Center, fall 1993), 64.

¹¹ Carole K. Fink, *Cold War: An International History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 151.

¹² Froman, *The Development of the Idea of Détente*, 52.

¹³ Richard W. Stevenson, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: Relaxations of Tensions in US-Soviet Relations 1953-84* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985), 4-5.

¹⁴ Raymond Garthoff, “Mutual Deterrence, Parity and Strategic Arms Limitation in Soviet Policy,” in *Soviet Military Thinking*, ed. Derek Leebaert 92-94 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 92-94.

détente was recognised even by Brezhnev's Soviet Union (1964-1982) and, for this reason, his main domestic policy challenge was addressed to find a balance between the demand for easing tensions with the US and the demand for a higher state martial preparedness. Détente was perceived as a dichotomy, chequered between the intensification of a peaceful conjunction with the Western American superpower and the increment of arms procurement.¹⁴

"...Peaceful coexistence means neither the preservation of the social and political status quo nor the weakening of the ideological struggle and activity of the Communist Parties..."¹⁵

The intent, and major interest, of Leonid Brezhnev was the implementation of the combined efforts with the United States, in order to move détente towards directions that would widen Soviet economic interdependence with stronger capitalist economies. In this way, those capitalist resources would be complemented by national ones, in order to improve the Soviet level of technological and methodical progress.¹⁶

"We must conduct negotiations in a big way, not a small-minded way. And the arrangement we achieve should encourage tranquillity in the world."¹⁷ These words, uttered by Brezhnev during a conversation with Kissinger, well express the concrete intentions of the Soviet leader on putting into action parallel plans to fulfil a global stability.

Nixon and Brezhnev met in the ancient St. Catherine Hall of the Kremlin palace in Moscow, on May 29, 1972, to sign a range of bilateral documents and agreements, among which "The Basic Principles of U.S.-Soviet Relations" and SALT (The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks).¹⁸

However, at the beginning, the proposal of negotiated compromises and arms control with the United States was not totally positively accepted, especially after several years during which the Soviet military command, that had always been free in the arms race, and Brezhnev himself had considered the American counterpart as the main enemy. The sentiment of anti-Americanism was still preponderant.

The necessity of avoiding a direct nuclear confrontation with the US, that would be impossible to be won, was, primarily, recognised and displayed by some Soviet diplomats. The Head of the SALT delegation,¹⁹ Vladimir Semenov, was, in fact, accused by Andrej Grechko, the Minister of

¹⁴ Stevenson, *The Rise and Fall of Détente*, 3.

¹⁵ *Pravda*, 16 October 1974.

¹⁶ George W. Braslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1982), 200-203.

¹⁷ Brezhnev to Kissinger, 21 April 1972.

¹⁸ Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 192-193.

¹⁹ The SALT I team was constituted by Vladimir Semenov, Deputy Foreign Minister, Georgy Korniyenko, Head of the US Department of the Foreign Ministry, Alexander Shchukin, Head of the scientific council to the Military-Industrial Commission, Peter Pleshakov, Representative of Radio Ministry, Generals Nikolaj Alekseyev and Nikolaj Ogarkov, and by Vladimir Pavlichenko, Representative of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB. See: Aleksander V. Savel'yev and Nikolaj N. Detinov, *The Big Five: Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger 1995), 9-12.

Defence, of “giving in to American pressure”. Neither Brezhnev was very enthusiast and supportive of the advancement of the new pacific stage with the American adversary and warned the diplomats, before the Helsinki Conference²⁰ in October 1969, that the KGB²¹ was nearby to control the situation.²² Reciprocally suspicious, Washington and Moscow, for many months, since February 1969, did not achieve any result. The Politburo²³ had to collectively approve every message by the Soviet Union to the White House; there were no direct channels of communication. The absence of mutual trust and a deep abyss in priorities did not favour Soviet-American relations in this historic phase.

President Nixon was absorbed by the Vietnam issue and his first concern was directed at the demand of pressures that should be applied by Moscow on Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam, to end the Vietnam War; Soviet Politburo considered, as most pressing and imminent matter, the negotiations on bilateral arms control.²⁴ The first approach of Brezhnev to President Nixon happened in the summer of 1971; the previous summit meeting between the two superpowers, in fact, revealed to be a diplomatic failure for the United States, since Soviet Foreign Minister Andrej Gromyko insisted to shift the focus of the gathering from the Vietnam question to the West Berlin one.

On August 5, 1971 Nixon sent his first personal letter to Brezhnev, kindly asking him to become his partner in order to discuss “big affairs”. During the previous months, the communication and the rapport between the two leaders were gradually improving, thanks to the following of several events. The positive result obtained by Brezhnev after the successful conclaves with Egon Karl-

²⁰ The Helsinki Conference was held in 1969 and all European countries, Canada and the United States participated. It was a previous step for the Helsinki Final Act, even called the Helsinki Accords, consisting of a leading diplomatic agreement. The main aim of the Helsinki Accords was the reduction of the existing tensions between the Soviet bloc and the Western one, by making firm the common acceptance of the inviolability of the post-World War II European status quo. This agreement was nonbinding and pledged the 35 signing countries to cooperate in humanitarian, economic and scientific fields. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Helsinki Accords” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Helsinki-Accords>.

²¹ In Russian, *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopanosti*; in English *Committee for State Security*. The KGB was the domestic security agency and the foreign intelligence of the Soviet Union. The protection of the USSR political leadership was included among its responsibilities, such as the general surveillance of the citizenry and the supervision of border military units. See: Robert W. Pringle, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “KGB” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2017). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/KGB>.

²² Odd A. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21.

²³ The Politburo, in Soviet history, was the supreme policy making body of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). Until 1990 it exercised leading control over the Soviet government. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Politburo” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2013). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Politburo>.

²⁴ Anatolij F. Dobrynin, “Memorandum of the conversation of A. F. Dobrynin, Ambassador of the USSR to the USA with Kissinger, 12 July 1969”, in *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 3, by James G. Hershberg (Washington: Wilson Center, fall 1993), 64.

Heinz Bahr²⁵ and Willy Brandt²⁶, his personal growth in self-confidence, coming after the 24th Party Congress in March-April 1971²⁷ and the sudden statement of Nixon's seven-day official trip to Beijing in February 1972²⁸ enforced the interest and the will of the Soviet General Secretary to visit the United States and to personally meet with President Nixon. From that moment, the US launched a sort of "triangular diplomacy", an integrate and synchronised reconciliation with China, at that time named as PRC, People's Republic of China, and USSR.²⁹

PRC was a central factor in bilateral Soviet-US relations. Brezhnev would exploit détente as a kind of alliance to weaken and isolate China itself; whereas Nixon, in addition to discouraging USSR's claims, took advantage from the Sino-Soviet conflict, employing emergent American friendliness and softening with PRC to exert pressure and influence over the Soviet Union.³⁰

Brezhnev soon proposed to hold a summit between USSR and the US in Moscow, in May 1972, that would be prepared and supervised by himself in person. He was firmly convinced that the international scenario depended upon the Soviet and American policies. However, achieving that summit was much more complicated than expected, since some crises were about to occur. The first shake was the risk of worsening of relations of Soviet Union with West Germany. In the Bundestag, Brandt encountered a no-confidence vote that endangered the endorsement of the Soviet-Western German Treaty in the name of a rapprochement. Brezhnev, decided, so, to appeal to Washington asking for an intervention in politics of West Germany, in order to help the same

²⁵ Egon Karl-Heinz Bahr was a German government official and covered a fundamental role in the rise and advance of Ostpolitik, that is the Western German policy addressed to the rapprochement and to the amelioration of relations with the Soviet Bloc. First, he was deputy chancellor and then cabinet-level adviser on Eastern policy, under Brandt's chancellorship, dedicating himself to negotiate with the Soviet Union and East Germany, idealising a hypothetical future German reunification. See: Melinda C. Shepherd, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Egon Karl-Heinz Bahr" (\: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2015). <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Egon-Karl-Heinz-Bahr>.

²⁶ Willy Brandt, whose original name was Herbert Ernst Karl Frahm, was the leader of the German SPD (Social Democratic Party) and chancellor of the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) from 1969 to 1974. He received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1971 for his efforts to reconcile Western Germany with the Soviet bloc. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Willy Brandt" (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2017). <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Willy-Brandt>.

²⁷ The 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was convoked in Moscow and lasted since 30 March until 9 April 1971. The agenda consisted of the Report of the instructions and regulation for the next Five-Year Economic Development Plan of the Soviet Union, in the Report of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Central Committee, carried by Brezhnev and in the elections of the central organs of the Party. See: Rotislav G. Okulov, *The 24th CPSU Congress: Socialism in Action* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1971), 8–9.

²⁸ President Nixon's visit to PRC, officially the People's Republic of China, from 21 to 28 February 1972, was an indispensable move to open a new diplomatic and harmonious period of resumption of relations between the two countries. By visiting China, in fact, Nixon implicitly recognised the legitimacy of PRC, governed by the Communist Party of China (CPC), and of its rulers. In exchange, Mao Tse-tung, Chairman of the CPC, granted his personal and authoritative imprimatur for the reconciliation. See: William H. Overholt, "President Nixon's Trip to China and Its Consequences," in *Asian Survey* 13, no. 7 (July 1973): 707-721, doi: 10.2307/2642707.

²⁹ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), 245-263.

³⁰ Alexander George, "U.S.-Soviet Relations: Evolution and Prospects," in *Mutual Security: A New Approach to Soviet-American Relations*, ed. Richard Smoke and Andrei Kortunov, 19-41 (Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1991), 27.

Brandt.³¹ The Soviet-Western German Treaty was ratified on May 17, 1972, less than one month after Brandt's victory of the vote of confidence.

Once the dealings with West Germany had been settled, the dialogue between Soviet Union and the United States seemed to become again the reciprocal priority, but the emerging situation in South Asia tested again the relational stability of the two antithetical superpowers. India, supported by the USSR and receiving, from the latter, huge amounts of armaments, invaded Eastern Pakistan in December 1971. Pakistanis responded by attacking Indian air stations. The war spread, and the US reacted hysterically. Pakistan was, in fact, a Chinese ally and that armed conflict would threaten the building up of the aforementioned American triangular diplomacy. Nixon decided to send the US Navy to protect the Bay of Bengal and exhorted Brezhnev to guarantee that any Indian assault in Western Pakistan would be avoided. The Soviet-American summit was becoming more and more unsteady and tottering.³²

The main obstacle remained, nevertheless, the Vietnam War. North Vietnam launched another offensive in the South; the US Air Force brutally answered by bombing the North, even hitting, accidentally, four Soviet merchant vessels and killing many sailors. The Politburo became embittered because of the happening and suggested to Brezhnev to cancel the summit, charging the US with the death of the Soviet personnel.

Brezhnev, on the contrary, continued to call upon the summit with Nixon, attempting to mediate with Kissinger during their secret meeting in Moscow on 21 and 22 April 1972. The disposition was in the spirit of compromise; Brezhnev's diplomacy revealed to be favourable in order to obtain American trust. The Soviet General Secretary was intentioned to bypass the Vietnam question, simply stating that even the Soviet Union was motivated to end the war, but without giving any further details.

His uppermost attention, was, indeed, more focused on other subjects concerning a deeper and generalised détente, firmly declaring to the US Secretary of State that there were several measures that could be taken to strengthen and solidify the relation between the two countries, in the name of such an elevated vocation.³³

Soviet state interests predominated over ideological ardours and this can be considered the reason why Brezhnev continued being in favour of the forthcoming Moscow summit with Nixon, despite the averseness and contrariety of the Minister of Defence Grechko and of the Second Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Suslov.

³¹ Vyacheslav I. Kevorkov, *Тайный Канал (Tajnyj Kanal)* (Moscow: Gea, 1997), 97-107.

³² Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 300-301.

³³ Viktor M. Suchodrev, *Язык мой – друг мой: от Хрущева до Горбачева (Jazyk moj – drug moj: ot Khrushcheva do Gorbacheva)* (Moscow: Izdatel'skiy Dom Tonchu, 2008), 263.

Brezhnev aimed at achieving a political parity with the United States; he did not content himself with the only military equality, forasmuch as Soviet attainment of an apparently advantageous equivalence of forces during the late 1960s did not reveal to be as beneficial as awaited. The US, provoked by the consolidation of the USSR's might and power, in actual fact, increased their pursuing of a more emphatic foreign policy and of a martial superiority.³⁴

The importance of the summit and of the development of a peaceful relationship with the United States resided in several fields of actions; it would be convenient for the reaching of a framework leading to a strategic parity, for the amelioration of the technological domain, especially relative to the construction of oil and gas pipelines through Siberia, for the economic return thanks to the re-opening within the Western market for the Soviet industries.³⁵ The draining rivalry and competition with the US resulted in a misallocation of domestic resources that aggravated internal problems; therefore, the necessity to de-ideologise Soviet own philosophy became imminent for the purpose of approaching to a broader interdependence, even with the United States themselves. Cooperation, in Brezhnev's thought, was a major step to deal with increasingly difficulties and troubles with food, energy and economics.³⁶ In his viewpoint, it is possible to find the motives behind his efforts to carry the official talks with President Nixon.

The Moscow Summit was finally held in May 1972, from 22 to 30, and it is still considered the emblem of the détente.

When Nixon arrived in Moscow, Brezhnev directly invited him for a private conversation, during which they mainly discussed about the non-employ against each other of nuclear weapons; the Soviet chief, *de facto*, seemed almost to lessen the essence of the détente to a mere mutual fright of a ruinous war. Brezhnev judged sufficient an agreement between the two leaders to assuage any fear.³⁷

The outcome of the talks was a document titled the Basic Principles Agreement (BPA), in which the identification of the specific question fields was underlined in order to evoke shared interests. The BPA evolved into an efficient agenda setting, giving precise recommendations to promote long-term cultural, scientific and economic bonds. In the background, efforts to minimise armaments were still of elemental importance. A major sensitive issue within the agreement was the establishment of some general standards both for cooperation and competition, stating that the ideological opposition between the two social systems would not interfere nor obstruct the

³⁴ George, "U.S.-Soviet Relations: Evolution and Prospects," 19-22.

³⁵ Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, 219-220.

³⁶ George, "U.S.-Soviet Relations: Evolution and Prospects," 23-24.

³⁷ Andrej M. Aleksandrov-Agentov, *От Коллонтай до Горбачева: Воспоминания дипломата, советника А.А. Громыко, помощника Л.И. Брежнева, Ю.В. Андропова, К.У. Черненко и М.С. Горбачева / Под ред. И.Ф. Огородниковой* (*От Kollontaj do Gorbacheva: Vospominaniya diplomata, sovetinika A.A. Gromyko, pomoshika L.I. Brezhneva, Ju.V. Andropova, K.U. Chernenko i M.S. Gorbacheva / Pod red. I.F. Ogorodnikovoj*) (Moscow: Meždunarodnye otnoshenija, 1994), 225, 232.

normalisation of relations. The tenets mentioned in the BPA, on the base of which USSR and the US would act, consisted of the principles of non-interference in reciprocal advantage and domestic affairs, of equality and of sovereignty. Continuing, another essential prerequisite was the realisation of the need of the renunciation of the use of force, to support and strengthen peaceful liaisons, avoiding the outbreak of any nuclear war and of any military action.

Basic Principles Agreement was, in this sense, in the name of compromise, even from a “phraseological” point of view. Soviet spokesmen inserted a caption reporting the expression “peaceful coexistence” that was differently perceived by the USSR and the US. As Kissinger declared, the United States were aware of the substantial discrepancy in perspectives, since both Soviet theories and aims did not coincide with the American ones, but, however, any constructive action in Soviet policy would be desirable whatever the Soviet purposes.³⁸ Nixon gave instructions to Kissinger for the pre-summit, so that he would make clear to Brezhnev that the US did not approve Soviet version of peaceful coexistence,³⁹ but that they would proceed with the signing without asking for any changes even to show gratitude for the diplomatic and military restraint the USSR had performed with the American air attacks in the Haiphong harbour in North Vietnam, during which the aforementioned Soviet vessels had been destroyed. The essence of the BPA was the exercise of mutual restraints, without trying to gain unilateral benefits at the expense of the counterpart.

Both of the signatories had reserves with reference to some statements; it was a quasi-agreement that moderated and regulated competition, but it mainly gave the impression of a real progress, rather than a concreteness. In the next years the vulnerability of the BPA would emerge because of divergent interpretations and ambiguities in some key concepts, such as reciprocity, equality, moderation and no unilateral expediency.⁴⁰

One more important upshot of the Moscow summit was the signing of the SALT I agreements, subsequently ratified in October of the same year, 1972. The SALT talks had begun in 1969 in Helsinki, where the Soviet Union and the United States both supported the essential measure to be taken in order to safeguard mutual deterrence, strategic stability, through limitation of weapons, and parity, by reducing the respective composition of forces.

³⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, “The Meanings of Peaceful Coexistence,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 35, no. 1 (January 1976): 8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3485130>.

³⁹ The concept of the Soviet peaceful coexistence was developed during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union by Khrushchev, in his attempt to put hostilities with the United States back to their right perspective, especially because of the risk of a nuclear war. The theory stated that the two superpowers, and their related ideological and political identities, could coexist instead of fighting one against the other. The objective was to assuage capitalist Western states, mainly the US, in order to let socialism spread and prevail over capitalism, not with force and communist revolution anymore, but by a good example. See: Wladyslaw W. Kulski, *Peaceful Co-Existence Analysis of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959), 662.

⁴⁰ George, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Evolution and Prospects,” 33-34.

From the American side, President Nixon strongly favoured the achievement of SALT I as to symbolise the success of détente. His interests in the strategic limitation of arms had gradually grown during years 1970 and 1971, as a counterpoise to his image, losing in credibility and positivity because of the Vietnam War.

From the Soviet angle, SALT I acquired a weight both in internal and international policy. General Secretary Brezhnev had globally identified his figure with a line of collaborative détente and with the “Peace Program”, endorsed in and after the 24th Congress of CPSU, during which even the necessary imminence of the SALT I treaties was stressed.⁴¹

The complex of agreements of SALT resulted to be very elaborate. Among the four reached agreements, the two most meaningful and substantial results were the Interim Agreement and Protocol on Limitation of Strategic Offensive Weapons and the ABM, namely the Treaty on Anti-Ballistic Missiles Systems, regulating the antiballistic missiles employed to wreck the ICBMs, incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The Interim Agreement reciprocally restricted the number of ICBMs and SLBMs, submarine launched ballistic missiles. The US could detain a maximum of 1,054 ICBMs, whereas USSR up to 1618, but there was no prohibition of modernising the already existing ones. Ballistic submarine missiles and launchers for SLBMs were both reduced, the US could possess 44 submarines and 710 launchers, USSR 62 modern submarine missiles and 950 launchers.⁴²

Contemporaneously, the limitations of ABM were applied upon 100 interceptor missiles and concerned one only mutual deployment area, with the aim to let each military party to guard and protect a unique section of their whole territory. The objective was to render both the USSR and the US factions subject and vulnerable to the hindering effect of the counterpart’s strategic power.⁴³

The other two arrangements were the Accident Measures Agreement and the Hot Line Agreement, declaring that it could be used exclusively in urgent situations requiring prompt explanation.

An additional significant outcome to be underlined was the naissance of the concept of mutual security, since the same SALT I established that security cannot be reached at acceptable cost and risk, in case it was dependent upon unilateral efforts. This coincided with the reason why endeavours must be complementary and simultaneous by the two subscribing superpowers.

⁴¹ Raymond L. Garthoff, “Salt I: An Evaluation,” *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (October 1978): 1-25. doi: 10.2307/2009965.

⁴² Mason Willrich and John B. Rhinelander, “An Overview of SALT I,” *The American Journal of International Law* 67, no. 5 (November 1973): 28-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25660473>.

⁴³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Strategic Arms Limitation Talks” (Edinburg: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2016). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Strategic-Arms-Limitation-Talks>.

However, at the end, SALT I did not conduct to any diminution in the overall fabrication of nuclear weapons, neither to a reduction of conventional armaments. Military interference remained unchanged, despite the enunciated good intentions.⁴⁴

The principal contention between Soviet Union and the United States dwelt in relation to the matter of the FBS, Forward Based Systems. It had been temporarily put aside to reach a breakthrough in 1972, but basically it remained unsolved. The disaccord between the two adverse dominions over the definition of “strategic” became more focal and a radical splitting point.

According to Soviet negotiators, the term strategic had to be referred to all those weapons that could directly threaten the security of the homeland, independently of the site they were deployed in. Because of this extreme vision, USSR asked for the inclusion in the range of SALT I even of the intercontinental missiles of NATO allies, mainly the United Kingdom and France, and not only of the American ones.

On the other hand, the United States defined strategic on the base of their own technical abilities. Their major worry was to limit central nuclear systems equipped with intercontinental ranges. No shared decision would be attained on FBS, neither during the following years, nor under the succeeding Presidencies; USSR and the US would continue to fight for making predominate their personal standpoint.⁴⁵

Talks and negotiations to complete the deal over the limitation of strategic weapons continued in Geneva in September 1972, but soon got stuck. They would be taken up again in 1974 in Moscow, allowing to reach an agreement in Vienna only in June 18, 1979, when Brezhnev and the new President of the United States, Jimmy Carter (1977-1981), signed the SALT II treaty, making it official.⁴⁶

Avoiding a nuclear war had become the preponderant concern during the era of détente, but it cannot be considered as the unique threat. Myopic self-interests were the focal point of superpowers’ cooperation in preventing direct crashes. But, if the protection of vital security facilitated collaboration, anarchy in collaboration itself did not favour the scope. Each superpower kept aiming to continue to be the other’s major hazard to security and internal stability, managing the human welfare worldwide.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ “Under Cover of Detente,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 10/12 (March 1981): 348-349. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4369606>.

⁴⁵ Stephen M. Millett, “Forward-Based Nuclear Weapons and SALT I,” *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 79-97. doi: 10.2307/2150206.

⁴⁶ Martin Schram, “Carter and Brezhnev Sign SALT II,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 1979.

⁴⁷ Steve Weber, “Detente, and Nuclear Weapons,” *International Organization* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 55-72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706809>.

In June 1973 Nixon and Brezhnev met for a second summit, during which they signed the Agreement on Prevention of Nuclear Weapons, another vague political document, reporting ambiguous claims about the sharing of responsibilities of Soviet Union and the United States.

The inconsistency in single perceptions and expectations led to an escalating decline in responsiveness for cooperation; in this regard, the commitments of the last-mentioned agreement were violated some months after the signature by the USSR and its giving support to Egypt in its attack on Israel in October 1973.⁴⁸

The Soviet behaviour in Middle Asia was perceived as very provocative by the United States that reacted by beginning a new military force, with the purpose of testing real Soviet intentions and to forestall further interventions of the USSR in the Third World. The previous American doctrine of “strategic sufficiency” shifted into a countervailing strategy, embracing eventual counterforce attacks to weaken Soviet military assets. The United States began to advance their involvement in the Third World conflicts guaranteeing indirect sidelong aid to irregular units fighting Soviet-upheld regimes in Africa, such as the People’s Republic of Angola and the Somali Democratic Republic, and Asia, where a major Soviet satellite was the Iraqi Republic.

The Soviet Union, however, comprehended the American message in a completely dissimilar way. The vehemence showed by the United States towards Soviet military build-up, was considered as a symbol of their compliance. Only after a while, Brezhnev became conscious of his miscalculation, understanding that the US’ moves were addressed to the re-establishment of their supremacy to run their own affairs.

In August 1975, the United States signed, with Canada and 33 European countries, in Helsinki, the Final Act of the CSCE, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, in an attempt to improve and stabilise relations with the Soviet bloc, especially the Soviet Union. On the Soviet side there was much anxiety and uncertainty about the future evolution of the CSCE, since, besides problems of political alignment, the more emphasis was placed on the relationship between the members of the Final Act, more difficult would be to maintain unchanged the socialist distinctness. The central preoccupation was the insertion of sections over human rights, opener movements and freer circulation of information. According to the USSR, the attention reserved to these subjects was a challenge to examine socialist ideological firmness of the whole system inside the socialist countries and it would represent a threat for Soviet security.

⁴⁸ The Yom Kippur War was initiated by Egypt and its ally Syria on the 6 October 1973 and lasted twenty days. The USSR supported Egypt, on the base of the Treaty of Friendship with Egypt, signed between Brezhnev and Egyptian President Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat; on the contrary President Nixon established an emergency supply line to help Israel. The ceasefire was called by the United Nations Security Council. The peace agreement established Israeli withdrawal into the western Sinai and Egyptian reduction in size of its forces towards the eastern side. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Yom Kippur War” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Yom-Kippur-War>.

On the other hand, the Western bloc was afraid that the only ambition of the Soviet Union was to impose its military supremacy, leading European countries to limit their reliance on the United States, as guarantor of their security. The general plan of this reduction of American influence would be, in the Soviet scheme, the institutionalisation of a “new arrangement of collective security”, where the Soviet military preponderance would be the administrator.⁴⁹

Misperception of the Final Act would remain unresolved and reciprocal distrust and lack of confidence would not be figured out. Nevertheless, CSCE revealed to be useful to achieve a broader cooperation, even in the technical and economic fields, on the initiative of the Soviet negotiators that proposed special conferences on matters concerning the environment, the transportation and the energy market.

Western signatories drew the conclusions that monopoly to which they had striven for ruling the international scenario was no longer feasible, since there was a developing countervailing power that could not be ignored. USSR had to be integrated in their strategy.⁵⁰

At the end, the Helsinki Final Act would contribute to an amelioration of East-West dialogue, despite the perpetual obstacles and mutual suspects.

Ambiguity and secrecy kept going, so, in order to mitigate the damage, Brezhnev, in January 18, 1977, pronounced the famous “Tula Speech”, explicitly declaring that USSR aspired to military parity and not superiority. The same communication would be conveyed again and again in the near future, ensuring that the Soviet Union would never promote a nuclear attack.⁵¹

It soon became evident that the presence of two separate dynamics would move along the loss of the momentum. Détente started deteriorating, efforts to establish widespread guidelines, gradually, have been sloped towards specific attempts to tackle details of each individual issue. Two distinct inclinations arose, a Soviet-American one and an intra-European one, whose effects would be more profitable. Détente, therefore, ceased to be a constructive and effective concept for the former, but remained and continued to be helpful and beneficial for the latter.

To sum up, the purpose of the USSR and the US seemed to be the same, the avoidance of a nuclear war and the limitation of the nuclear weapons race. The net detachment between the two was recognisable in the hope of economic return and benefits. The Soviet Union strived for gaining in technology and grain. In 1972 the United States agreed over large amounts of purchases of American national grain by the Soviet Union, after a period led by misunderstandings of buying intentions; three years later, in 1975, the agreement got a long-term extent.

⁴⁹ Brian Fall, “The Helsinki Conference, Belgrade and European Security,” *International Security* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1977): 100-105. doi: 10.2307/2538662.

⁵⁰ Sachin Chaudhuri, ed., “Congress of Helsinki,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 10, no. 31 (August 1975): 1139. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4537290>.

⁵¹ Weber, “Detente, and Nuclear Weapons,” 74-82.

The years 1978 and 1979 showed a progressive worsening of bilateral relations, chain reactions occurred, with no precise starting point. Some episodes can be pointed out in the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the Camp David Agreement in September 1978, signed at the White House between Egypt and Israeli, under the evidence of the US President Carter, or in the diplomatic recognition of PRC by the United States, annoying the USSR or, on the other side, in the Soviet “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation” of November 4, 1978 with Vietnam, in the name of mutual support and fraternity, treaty that would be disowned by China, accusing Vietnam of being a “puppet-state”; continuing, or in the discovery of a Soviet division in Cuba,⁵² or, furthermore in the decision taken by NATO of allowing the employment of nuclear medium-range missiles in Europe.

USSR never declared to be willing to abandon and renounce to its aid to and backup of radical leftist forces of the Third World, in honour of the détente with the United States.

Brezhnev himself stated that the rapprochement between the two rival superpowers was a totally different matter and completely detached from the ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism. Forasmuch as the socio-political ideology and the relinquishment of the use of nuclear arms were considered by USSR as two isolated aspects, Soviet interference in Third World’s questions did not cease.⁵³

And the same recklessness and imperialistic expansionism of the Soviet Union, leading to invade Afghanistan in December 1979, would be the final and harshest affront to the United States. The invasion definitely marked the end of the period of détente.

1.3 The Brezhnev Doctrine: a mere justification?

A partial justification to Soviet intrusion and intromission within Third World countries’ affairs was identified in the Brezhnev Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty.

It was a concept developed during the 70s, to retroactively justify the Soviet invasion in August 1968 of Czechoslovakia.

⁵² By late November 1962 President Kennedy and General Secretary Khrushchev reached an agreement over Cuba. The Soviet Union promised that all the missiles would return back, in exchange the United States assured that any work on the missile sites would be stopped and that they would never invade Cuba. Withdrawal of troops was compulsory and granted. That arrangement was taken after the Cuban missile crisis, happened between 22 and 28 October of the same year, 1962, that brought the two superpowers close to a direct war because of the presence of Soviet nuclear-armed missiles on the territory of Cuba. Those missiles could rapidly hit Eastern United States within few minutes, reason why the US opted for a blockade of the island, in order to prevent other Soviet cargos of missiles. In order to avoid the war, the US and USSR decided to act more diplomatically, coming to a compromise. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Cuban Missile Crisis” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cuban-missile-crisis>.

⁵³ Dimitri K. Simes, “The Death of Détente?” *International Security* 5, no. 1 (Summer 1980): 3-25. doi:10.2307/2538471.

Eleven years later, thanks to its vagueness, it was employed again as a justification for the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Initially destined to the member-nations of the Warsaw Pact,⁵⁴ it was extended to the just cited non-Warsaw Pact state, exploiting the broadness of its founding principles.

The Soviet-led Czechoslovakian invasion, in reality, was not an expressly Warsaw Pact affair. The terms of the contract were, in fact, modified and rewritten to consolidate the Soviet counter-reaction, in case a similar scenario would reappear.⁵⁵

The doctrine was firstly legibly exhibited by the Russian activist for human rights, Sergej Kovalev, who, on September 26, 1968, delineated it in an article of the Russian broadsheet newspaper, *Pravda*, at that time the official one of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

After about two months, the speech that enunciated the naissance of such a doctrine was held on November 12, 1968. It was uttered just earlier than the Fifth Polish Communist Party Congress by Brezhnev, who took advantage of the occasion to criticise the West, emphasising to glorify communist actions of the past and to exhort the socialist states to honour their political and ideological fundamentals.

The focus of the discussion, that was pronounced almost at the end of his discourse, pinpointed the rigorous respect the socialist countries had to reserve to all countries in the name of domestic sovereignty, parallel with the defence and institutionalisation of those states that embraced the path for the edification of a socialist politic body.

Independence of single socialist countries was declared of being as the main tenet of the Communist Party that was in favour of autonomous development following peculiar national needs and characteristics.⁵⁶ So, Brezhnev was interested in highlighting how much attention was given to specific identities of socialist nations, but, contemporaneously, he even underlined the presence of general socialist common laws, that had to be preserved by any deviation from the socialism itself. In the case internal or external pressures would reveal to be antagonistic, and especially if they would try to put into power a capitalist regime, menacing the socialist communitarian security, all the socialist forces of every country should get in on the action.

⁵⁴ The Warsaw Pact was a treaty of mutual assistance, friendship and cooperation, signed on May 14, 1955. It was originally formed by the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Albania (withdrawing in 1968), Romania, Poland and Hungary. It established the mutual and reciprocal defence and stipulated the setting up of a unified and integrated military command. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Warsaw Pact" (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018) <https://www.britannica.com/event/Warsaw-Pact>.

⁵⁵ Thomas Crump, *Brezhnev and the Decline of the Soviet Union* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 124-125.

⁵⁶ Stephen G. Glazer, "The Brezhnev Doctrine," *The International Lawyer* 5, no. 1 (January 1971): 169-171. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40704652>.

Fraternity had to be the uplift to initiate actions to defeat any enemy of socialism, even investing military measures.⁵⁷

The Brezhnev Doctrine was imprecise and generalised over the countries to which it was applicable; it seemed to be extendable to all socialist countries facing a crisis and in need of a supportive intervention. In this sense, limited sovereignty was a pretext to legalise armed action and not a concrete explanation.⁵⁸

In practical terms, the policy backed a limited independence of the communist parties of the Soviet satellite states, sealing the impossibility of leaving the Warsaw Pact or the interference in the monopolistic socialist ruling of a country. Cohesiveness and integrity of the whole Eastern bloc had to be preserved at any cost. Each socialist country owned the authority of self-determination but serving before the interests of the CPSU and of the socialism itself and, so, remaining subdued and meek. Actually, such a doctrine enhancing a limited sovereignty, agreeing with military responses in order to preserve order and stability within the socialist axis, showed the strictness and irreversible leadership of the Soviet Union, ill-disposed towards any alteration of course of its socialist followers.⁵⁹

The doctrine was born posthumous the Prague Spring⁶⁰ to condemn the reformative attempts of Alexander Dubček in Czechoslovakia, carried out since January 5, 1968, once he became the head of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. His purpose was to create a more liberal and open interpretation of what he defined the “developed socialism with a human face”. The reformist wave ended on August 20, 1968 with the Soviet invasion to definitively stop the spreading of this innovative socialism.⁶¹ The immediate outcome was the realisation by Brezhnev of the necessity of a return to a more integrated socialism, both from economic and political side, strengthening the ideological value of orthodoxy; cooperation among parties of the Soviet bloc should be promoted, in order to speed up any counteroffensive to eventual threats constituting a peril for the integrity of the socialist dogma. Socialism reached the level of internationalism; it gradually

⁵⁷ Leonid I. Brezhnev, “Speech before the Polish Communist Party Congress,” *Moscow Tass International Service in English*, November 12, 1968.

⁵⁸ Glazer, “The Brezhnev Doctrine,” *The International Lawyer* 5: 177-179.

⁵⁹ Wilfried Loth, “Moscow, Prague and Warsaw: Overcoming the Brezhnev Doctrine,” *Cold War History* 1, no. 2 (2001): 103-118. doi: 10.1080/71399992.

⁶⁰ The Prague Spring was a period characterised by reforms and attempts of liberalisation in Czechoslovakia, implemented under Dubček, becoming the leader of the party in January 1968. He granted more freedom of expression for the press, he rehabilitated all those fallen from grace because of Stalinist political purges, he promulgated the revision of the constitution guaranteeing civil and human rights, claiming he was proposing a “socialism with a human face”. Even if Dubček insisted that he was able to control the change in Czech socialism (he promised self-determination for Slovakia), the CPSU and the member-states of the Warsaw Pact, fearing the contagion of the innovative socialism within their countries, opted for invading Czechoslovakia to end the period of transformation. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Prague Spring” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Prague-Spring>.

⁶¹ Jeremi Suri, “The Promise and Failure of ‘Developed Socialism’: The Soviet ‘Thaw’ and the Crucible of the Prague Spring, 1964-1972,” *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 2 (May 2006): 145-146. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081303>.

consolidated, thanks to its permeating background dominated by the Brezhnev Doctrine. The first phase, since 1971 to mid-1976 was distinguished by a coveted optimism in the name of a generalised stability within the Eastern bloc, even accompanied by a spell of prosperity and improved standards of living. The second phase of the doctrine, since 1976 to early 1980s, instead, was a period of decline, both politically and economically. Moscow had to face an important decision, connected to this critical situation. The care and keeping of uniformity and fixedness of Eastern European countries had been always judged as a priority among Soviet national responsibilities but persisting in achieving it would mean an active involvement even inside the crises. The alternative would be an overturning of some communist governments, but it would be a hard blow for the whole “socialism internationalism”.⁶² The armed vigilance over all the communist parties was reckoned to be a priority, since the weakening of any component of the chain of co-relations among socialist member-states could represent a menace for the system in its completeness and the foregoer of a ripple effect.

In conclusion, decision to invade Afghanistan was a demonstration of the internationalism the Soviet Union was intended to give to its socialism, despite its inconsistency with the détente and the peaceful relations USSR was building up with the United States and Western Europe. The choice of overrunning was the proof of the fulfilment of Soviet promises laying stress on security, since the fate of the Soviet safety was indissolubly linked to the Afghan protection of communism. Socialist internationalism was a concept developed at the same time of the naissance of the Bolshevik movement, but, previously, it was called “proletarian internationalism”. It was claimed in Marx’s *Communist Manifest* to draw the attention of worldwide proletarians to make them collaborate in the name of a class liberation.

From its origins, “socialism internationalism” was proclaimed after the World War II, because of the advent of brand-new socialist states. It was considered being a fraternal cooperation among all the countries espousing the socialist cause and, in this sense, it was the natural evolution of the “proletarian internationalism” at inter-state relational level.⁶³ The fundamental step was the formalisation of the possibility and, furthermore, of the imperative, of ruling the socialist states with the employment of force. Generalising, the Brezhnev Doctrine itself interpreted the law alleging the relevance of an oppressive and coercive ruling. Although the Soviet Union was a Permanent Member within the Security Council of the United Nations since 1945, and the Charter of the United Nations asseverated the existence by right of sovereign states forming the international system (art. 2, para. 4) and the remote chance of using force only to preserve the

⁶² Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 65-66.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

“inherent right of individual or collective self-defence” after the decision of the Security Council (art.51), the Soviet superpower defended its own elucidation on the utilise of armed measures.⁶⁴ According to its revised version of the Charter, Soviet forces were allowed to intervene anytime a socialist government was facing a concrete risk of collapse or, more simply, each time the situation so required, to secure “the gains of socialism”. At the General Assembly of the United Nations on October 3, 1969, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko openly defended the communist commonwealth and its sentence of invading Czechoslovakia, adducing as explication and justification the simple answer that the national question has been solved only by such socialist resolution.⁶⁵

The Brezhnev Doctrine, to find a plausible excuse to the armed action in Czechoslovakia, and for future eventual repetitions, stated that no socialist state would autonomously leave the Warsaw Pact and, consequently, any softening of the vigour of the socialist regime was, without any doubt, cause and consequence of a Western capitalist intromission.

Every Communist Party of each socialist country was considered responsible to its own people, but also to the whole movement. Therefore, departures from the pure socialism would damage the principal purposes of all the other correlated communist parties, becoming a real struggle.

Brezhnev revendicated the respect the socialist states reserved to the international norms, claiming that he, and they, were solely contrary to the exportation and importation of counterrevolution, rejecting extremist adventurists wishful to “sell abroad” the communist revolution, breaking into self-determined states’ internal organization. Socialism internationalism was transformed into a basic principle of international rule, whose democratic standards were honoured, but through the defilement of Soviet view of democracy.⁶⁶

The interpretation of Marxism-Leninism and of the socialist principles had to be independent and free, but no deviation would be tolerated.⁶⁷ Toleration against dissidents was drastically reduced since the mid-late 60s; the founding grounds were associated with the several dares the Soviet Union had to encounter during the following decade. The Eurocommunism⁶⁸ was developing in

⁶⁴ Nicholas Rostow, “Law and the Use of Force by States: The Brezhnev Doctrine,” *The Yale Journal of World Public Order* 7, no. 2 (1981): 209-211, 235. <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjil/vol7/iss2/4>.

⁶⁵ “The Defence of Socialism is Our Supreme Internationalist Duty,” *Pravda*, August 22, 1968, editorial article.

⁶⁶ Robert A. Jones, *The Soviet Concept of ‘Limited Sovereignty’ from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Brezhnev Doctrine* (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc., 1989), 166-167.

⁶⁷ Leonid Brezhnev, “The Brezhnev Doctrine,” in *The Geopolitics Reader*, ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge, 74-77 (London: Routledge, 1998), 74.

⁶⁸ Eurocommunism was a trend developed in Europe during 1970s and 1980s, mainly within the communist parties of Spain and Italy, in order to detach from the Soviet Communist Party. It was characterised by the rejection of the subordination to the Soviet socialist doctrine, stating that each communist party could freely and independently actuate policies, following the country’s peculiar necessities and traditions. After 1989 most of the communist parties became social democratic. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Eurocommunism” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2017). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eurocommunism>.

Spain and Italy as an optional alternative to the Soviet prototype, Romania with Nicolae Ceausescu asserted its independence from Soviet communism and China proposed the building up of an axis with Yugoslavia and Romania. In order to fight these imminent obstacles, the Soviet Union adopted a counteroffensive based on four dimensions.

The first one consisted of the reaffirmation of the global legitimacy of the Soviet model. At the 24th Communist Party Congress held in 1971, Brezhnev presented his theory of a “developed socialism”, placing the Soviet Union at the highest level of development of socialism as an integral part of the society. The aim of the General Secretary was to prompt Eastern states to reach the same level of the USSR as a “developed socialist” society, both to reinforce their craving for a stronger integration of socialism in their internal organisation, both to entice them to entail a more unified and only status.

The second dimension was the call for unity that has regularly been a constant argument during the International Conferences of Communist and Workers Parties, happened in 1969 and 1976. They revealed to be a sort of failure from the point of view of restoration of unity, but they achieved the goal of more clearly pointing out internal and external antagonists of socialism.

The third feature was the ideological cooperation with the purpose of finding a consensus by a system of contact among parties since the 1970s. In 1973 Brezhnev decided even to launch yearly meetings in Crimea with the heads of the communist parties belonging to the Warsaw Pact.

The fourth and last aspect was the revisited campaign for integration. After the invasion in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union found a guile to increase and improve operative ties-up with the members of the Eastern communist bloc.⁶⁹

The fraternal countries to which Brezhnev was addressing, from East Germany up to Bulgaria, were valued by himself as an equal extension of the same Soviet Union, named a “zone of peace”, whose borders could not be shaken. His emotional upheaval and loathing to any hypothetical metamorphosis derived just from the high perception he had towards the socialist integrated group. Territorial cohesion and its preservation were the main reasons that made him a strong supporter of the Helsinki Conference and process in its whole. According to his thought, military assistance and aid to Egypt and North Vietnam were compulsory, in the name of the defence and immunity of the “unshakeable frontiers”.⁷⁰

Going deeply into the substance of the Afghan question, the main topic of this thesis, and its connexion with the Brezhnev Doctrine, it can be said that, in retrospect, Afghanistan was the field of action for a widening of the range of the doctrine. At the very beginning, in fact, it was applied

⁶⁹ Jones, *The Soviet Concept of 'Limited Sovereignty' from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Brezhnev Doctrine*, 168-173.

⁷⁰ Vladislav Zubok, “Do not think I am soft...: Leonid Brezhnev,” in *Mental Maps in the Era of Détente and the End of the old War 1968-91*, ed. Steven Casey and Jonathan Wright, 6-23 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10-13.

only as a rationale for operations requiring the use of force, but among the Eastern bloc countries. The Soviet Union opted for intervening in Afghanistan in 1979 to aid the government of the communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to fight the guerrillas of small Maoist groups and mainly of Muslim groups of mujahedeen, indirectly backed by the United States. The Soviet General Secretary firmly defended the strong intervention of the 5,000 Soviet troops on December 27, 1979.

Almost three weeks after the invasion, Brezhnev stated that the armed action had been implemented in the name of the communist revolutionary international solidarity. On February 23, 1981, at the 26th Party Congress, he asserted socialist-internationalist arguments, combined with geopolitical elements, to support and approve Soviet active and military participation within Afghan case. Brezhnev claimed that imperialism and capitalism unjustifiably attacked the Afghan communist revolution, menacing not only the country itself, but the entire socialist frontier too, reason why USSR had to intervene to preserve security both of its fraternal state and of the system in its wholeness.⁷¹

The Soviet Union perceived outside revolution as a means to weaken capitalism, parallel with an extension of the sphere of influence and of the correlative supremacy of socialism. This was the stimulus that drove USSR to behave as a defender of Afghan communism, since ideological beliefs, coercion and embryonic future power had become more meaningful than internal economic growing.⁷²

Therefore, the Brezhnev Doctrine, from its arising after the invasion in Czechoslovakia in 1968 to halt the spreading of an unconventional and independent communist option, until the invasion in Afghanistan to support the communist government against Muslim rebels, went through perceptive changes. Initially designed for the members of the Warsaw Pact, to regard the Soviet commonwealth, afterwards, it expanded its pales as far as non-Eastern bloc states (the reference is mainly addressed to Afghanistan). Making an instrumental use of the doctrine and of its precepts of fraternal cooperation and mutual military assistance let the Soviet Union to plead its founding principles to theoretically explain its war act in 1979. Brezhnev, not having deeply and accurately exhibited the Soviet limits, honours and obligations to the West and to his “socialist brothers”, was able to exploit the speeches he spoke in support of the integrity of socialism. Such talks furthermore stated the need for maintaining and safeguarding unity, through the rejection of any attempt of subversion against the socialist, or revolutionary communist, regimes. To conclude, Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, not to limit its expansionistic desires and its influence over the highest

⁷¹ Rostow, “Law and the Use of Force by States: The Brezhnev Doctrine”, 236-237.

⁷² Royal Judson Mitchell, “A New Brezhnev Doctrine: The Restructuring of International Relations,” *World Politics* 30, n. 3 (April 1978), 389-390. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009871>.

possible portion of world, employed the doctrine, bearing his name, to show to third parties that it was legally keeping, merely respecting moral values and the rules of conduct of the socialist ideological movement.

1.4 Turnover in the geopolitical objectives: a focus on Soviet foreign policy

The essentiality of preserving socialist ideological integrity did not impede to Soviet Union to promote its foreign policy towards agreements in the name of peaceful and collaborative co-existence with the Western bloc. In 1970 Soviet Union and West Germany signed a pact of non-aggression that would prove to be helpful in the pursuit of Soviet stabilisation.⁷³ East-West relations bettered, despite some incongruencies and controversies. By 1972, most of contentious cases were solved, bar the advancement in European disarmament that continued to represent a limitation to the completion of normalisation of relationship between the two factions.⁷⁴

Once the position with Western bloc was systematised, Brezhnev's Soviet Union began to direct its foreign policy to the revolutionary creeds of socialism, whose commitment was the exportation of the ideology abroad. To eternalise such intention, in 1977 Brezhnev approved a renewed Soviet Constitution, very detailed concerning the purposes and moves Soviet Union would achieve in foreign policy. The Article 28 got straight to the point in claiming that national interests of the USSR had to be protected as first objective and that, globally, socialism should spread and consolidate its influent position, mainly over those states struggling to reach national liberation and to boost social progression. Already in 1920, during the Conference of COMINTERN,⁷⁵ Lenin drew a parallelism between oppressed colonial nations and the revolutionary clash of the working class. Peaceful coexistence of opposite ideological trends should be sought, but the creation of favourable conditions for the development of worldwide, further, socialism-based regimes had to detain the priority.⁷⁶ The Soviet Union had been interested in the Third World, above all Middle East and South Asia, and, especially, in increasing its mastery over such developing countries, since 1950s. At the very beginning, USSR fought an actual fight of supremacy with the West, in order to exert a higher influence within the aforementioned states from all perspectives, political, economic, ideological and, of course, military. Middle East and South Asia had been reckoned

⁷³ Daniel Tarschys, *The Soviet Political Agenda: Problems and Priorities, 1950-1970* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), 79.

⁷⁴ David Holloway, "Foreign and Defence Policy," in *The Soviet Union since the fall of Khrushchev*, ed. Archie Brown and Michael Kaser, 49-76. 2nd ed. (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978), 65-66.

⁷⁵ COMINTERN, also called Communist International or Third International, was founded in 1919. It was an association of national communist parties, functioning as a control organ for the promotion of world communist revolution. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Third International" (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2017). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-International>.

⁷⁶ Otto Pick, "Introduction: Political and Ideological Aspects," in *The Soviet Union and the Third World*, ed. Edgar J. Feuchtwanger and Peter Nailor, 3-11 (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), 3-6.

regions of huge importance already by Khrushchev, especially thanks to their proximity to the Soviet Union, their strategic position, allowing access to the Indian Ocean, to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, and, furthermore, because of the presence of natural resources. The Soviet Union had become a significant player and supporter of Arab coalition in Arab-Israeli wars, settling several treaties of friendship with Iraq, Syria, North and South Yemen and Egypt. The belief was that, having signed some treaties, the presence and Soviet role onto the territories was legitimised and welcome. The driving force of the trend USSR foreign policy followed was the granting of economic assistance.⁷⁷ The Third World could become, in Soviet imaginary, a concrete and tangible stronghold against imperialism and capitalism, and this conception could explain why relationships between the Soviet Union and faraway non-Warsaw Pact states continued to be built up during the following decades.

The early 1970s betokened a turning shift in USSR foreign policy attentions; the superpower looked at the Third World with much more zealously, after a time of irrelevant interest. During the precedent period (approximately since 1954 to 1968), the Soviet Union promoted interventionism over there, but it was merely limited to considerable deliveries of advanced Soviet arms and to the transfer of Soviet military advisers and technicians to set their example to Third World's leaders. The relations between USSR and some of those radical-nationalist leaders tightened up, especially with Achmed Sukarno in Indonesia and Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt. The earlier stage of Soviet interventionism would conclude by late 1960s with substantial setbacks in Congo, Indonesia and Algeria. Initially, Brezhnev displayed, in fact, a sort of indifference towards the events in the Third World, considering them peripheral compared to the core foreign policy issues correlated to the United States and the Western bloc. The situation would turn over, as mentioned, by the beginning of the 70s, as soon as reduction in the possess of arms by the West and economic friendliness advanced.⁷⁸ The Soviet Union revived its interest towards the Third World, as to a more profound establishment of ascendancy. The reasons that prompted the 1970s USSR were recognisable in the higher Soviet self-confidence. The fulfilment of nuclear parity with the US represented a major safety in the involvement in overseas questions, without the fear of triggering an American nuclear counteroffensive; the attainment of the status of "Great Superpower", stemming from the previous statement, persuaded the Soviet Union of detaining the same rights to intervene over the Third World, not considering it anymore as a Western exclusivity; ex-Portuguese colonies, Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea, reached the independence

⁷⁷ Melvin A. Goodman, "Foreign Policy and Decision-Making Process in the Soviet Union," in *Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy Towards South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 86-110 (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1990), 86-87.

⁷⁸ Philip D. Stewart, James W. Warhola and Roger A. Blough, "Issue Salience and Foreign Policy Role Specialization in the Soviet Politburo of the 1970s," in *American Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 1 (February 1984), 19-22. doi: 10.2307/2110785.

in 1975 after a draining armed conflict against Portugal, backed by the United States that would not be positively seen anymore; last but not least, USSR developed new air-capable war ships, modern military aircrafts, assault vessels able to navigate in the ocean and a reinforced marine infantry.

With the purpose of not suffering again from the losses of friendly states, as happened in the late 1960s, Brezhnev opted for increasing efforts to mould peculiar mechanism to guarantee Soviet authority. The more effective and profitable means sounded to be the promotion of vanguard local communist parties that, for ideological nearness, would vouch the continuity of submissiveness.⁷⁹ In mid-late 1970s, Leonid Brezhnev became a fiery defender of the battle of “other peoples” in the name of freedom and progress. In this respect, in 1976 at the Communist Party Congress in Moscow, he demanded strong activism in honour of the victory of socialism, providing backing to Third World’s struggles for national liberation. He defended Soviet intromission in Angola, sustaining the People’s Movement for the Liberation in Angola (MPLA), declaring the communist People’s Republic of Angola in 1975. MPLA, founded in 1956, fought against Portugal for the independence and, throughout 1970s, was still fighting against the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), supported by the United States and South Africa, and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA).⁸⁰ Foreign policy of the Soviet Union would pursue the exploitation of opportunities, or rather it would sustain and back any attempts of civil or regional disputes, irrespective of costs in terms of physical strain and economic effort, to let preponderate communist revolutionaries, as in the mentioned case of Angola. The objective of military and financial bearings would constitute a consolidation of bilateral relations of USSR with defined states of the Third World and,⁸¹ contemporaneously, they would provide a major security to the extremely wide borders of the Soviet Union that, just because their extent, would be difficult to be defended. Brezhnev’s foreign policy, in fact, was much engaged in Soviet national security, totally disinteresting in its neighbours’ one.⁸²

USSR and the US appeared not to be much involved in the quest for agreements on how to conduct the authority over Non-Aligned Third World.⁸³ Within the “cold war agenda”, it seemed that the

⁷⁹ Michael T. Klare, “Marching to a Different Drummer: U.S. and Soviet Interventionism in the Third World,” in *Soviet-American Relations: Understanding Differences, Avoiding Conflicts*, ed. Daniel N. Nelson and Roger B. Anderson, 152-166 (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1988), 156-159.

⁸⁰ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Popular Movement for the Liberation in Angola” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2017). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Popular-Movement-for-the-Liberation-of-Angola>.

⁸¹ Morris McCain, “Thinking South: Soviet Strategic Interests in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan,” in *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 39-53 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 39-40.

⁸² Margot Light, Review of “World Power: Soviet Foreign Policy under Brezhnev and Andropov” by Jonathan Steele, *International Affairs* 60, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 502-503. doi: 10.2307/2617650.

⁸³ “Non-Aligned Movement”, in Soviet conception, was a practical part of the process of development of the Third World, fighting against imperialism and colonialism, in order to reach national liberation. The doctrine of Non-

Third World should remain independent from USSR's political and economic oppression, but selections over which states should stay free and how much influence could be exerted have never been plainly set up.⁸⁴ Soviet scheme, however, converged on the enforcing of collective, inclusive of Third World states, on arrangements to secure Soviet support and consequent authority over those regimes, belonging to a geostrategic environment. The first proposal of a collective security plan with the Middle East was presented by Brezhnev in 1969, but without any concrete outcome; none of the non-aligned states endorsed bilateral dealings with the USSR, except the communist Afghanistan. However, A positive result was achieved through the consolidation of the "zone of peace", encompassing neutralist⁸⁵ and socialist countries to develop distinct regional sectors of truce.⁸⁶

In the 1970s, the Soviet Union was not able anymore to economically finance South Asia and to come along with Third World in its states' transition towards socialism. No economic implementation had been achieved and the efforts, made by the USSR itself to strengthen local national state organisation, did not provoke, as budgeted, a weakening of the private sector. Financial and economic assistance revealed not to be as useful as estimated, so it suffered from a net reduction. Parallel with Soviet stepping back in pecuniary funds, there was an advancement in aggressive military policies directed to the Third World countries, whose officers were trained by the USSR. Furthermore, Brezhnev's foreign policy, motivated to an increasing of Soviet influence within developing countries, rich in oil, was seconded by huge transfers of arms, in exchange of hard currency payments that could help in turning around Soviet dire finances.⁸⁷

Soviet foreign policy, to define a generalised framework, during the decades, adapted to external circumstances and national capabilities, leading to an extensive and multiple in objectives political scheme based on several focal points. Economic considerations to import at lower prices by signing political agreements with the concerned countries, the achievement of military advantages, strategic refusal, the gaining of prestige over several regions, the incitement of anti-American sentiment, the preservation of security, the territorial expansion parallel with the worldwide

Alignment consisted of the concrete policy of inter-state league of distinct Non-Aligned countries. The Soviet Union, since Khrushchev's era, supported it, placing on the same footing the Third World's struggle for national liberation and the communist working class's one, elevating the first to a political-ideological conflict against the Western system. See: Roy Allison, *The Soviet Union and the strategy of non-alignment in the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 31-32.

⁸⁴ Hafeez Malik, "Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy: An Introduction," in *Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy towards South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 1-39 (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1990), 8.

⁸⁵ "Positive neutrality" was a political line concerning a foreign policy, implemented by several countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, based on the abstention of any alliance with Great Powers, even denying them the possibility to make use of their territories to establish military, naval or air bases. In a narrow sense, it was a policy on non-involvement in blocs. See: Allison, *The Soviet Union and the strategy of non-alignment in the Third World*, 22.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 79-82.

⁸⁷ Linda Racioppi, *Soviet Policy towards South Asia since 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3-6.

growing espousal of communist ideology, the support of vanguard communist parties and the improvement of the diplomatic-political surroundings, in order to better interact with the states to which USSR foreign policy was addressed, represented the guidelines of actual Soviet behaviour in foreign affairs throughout the 1970s.⁸⁸

To conclude, most of Soviet foreign policies, during the cited decade, were in support of movements for national liberation, to exploit overseas states' contradictions with the colonialist Western sphere. Brezhnev aimed for the overtaking of the US in number of economic co-partners and of socialism upholders.⁸⁹

The Soviet Union saw the Third World, implying Africa, Middle East and South Asia, as a vital strategic preserve. It was judged fundamental to assure to the USSR tactical pre-eminence in guaranteeing national security, due to the amplification of areas of Soviet influence and friendly territories, and, furthermore, it was deemed an added expansible arena of socialist ideological defence inside the contention with the United States.

1.4.1 Going into detail: Soviet foreign policy towards Africa

Soviet foreign policy was ramified on global scale.

As consequence of the Sino-Soviet split and the breaking down of the relations between USSR and PRC, in the 1970s, rivalry started to extend over Africa.

China was a main threat for Soviet foreign policy, since, being an ex-colonial victim, its alternative communism could be better accepted by African peoples and, furthermore, Chinese government promised massive cash donations, despite its relative poverty. China encouraged African governments to extend their relations with Europe and to vote in favour of Chinese entrance in the United Nations. In the meanwhile, Soviet interest towards this side of the world rose; it was a sort of innovation. Africa began to acquire significance in mid-early 60s. The tangible demonstration of the Soviet inclusive switching of focalisation in foreign policy was the inauguration of the first-ever Institute for the Study of African Affairs in Moscow, in 1959.⁹⁰ Soviet Union was much intrigued by Southern Africa, without any apparent reason, except that of deepening worldwide admiration for socialist ideology. Soviet Union, as beckoned before, supported MPLA in Angola that won the civil war in 1976 and adopted the Marxism-Leninism as the official party-ideology.

⁸⁸ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "Soviet Strategic Interests in the Middle East," in *Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy towards South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 213-224 (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1990), 213-214, 224.

⁸⁹ John Van Oudenaren, *The Tradition of Change in Soviet Foreign Policy: Two Schools of Soviet Diplomacy* (Washington DC: National Defense University Washington DC, 1990), 5.
<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a271580.pdf>.

⁹⁰ Pick, "Introduction: Political and Ideological Aspects", 7-8.

Soviet authority reached even Mozambique, fighting an anti-colonialist war to achieve autonomy from Portugal. USSR, together with Cuba, supported the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) that gained independence in 1975.⁹¹

If the attention of the USSR was destined to Southern African countries for a mere and basic desire for widening diffusion of Marxist socialism, the tangible implication of USSR within the Horn of Africa, throughout the 1970s, detained a more concrete meaning, taking consideration of the strategic position of such overseas countries.

Since the 1960s, armed martial involvement of Soviet troops became extensive in the Horn of Africa, co-participating in local hostile frictions. States included within such region are Ethiopia, to which the Soviet Union addressed the most of its interests, Somalia and the small Djibouti Republic.

Ethiopia during the 1950s, and continuing in the course of the 1960s, built up a strong relationship with the United States, being an imperial regime and, consequently, closer to Western sphere. It was a neutral state but pro-American. Communications and liaisons with USSR were restricted to the minimum. The tipping point, showing a glimmer of hope for Soviet Union to penetrate within Ethiopia, was in 1963, with the Somali asking for independence of the Ogaden, an eastern portion of Ethiopian territory. Guerrillas between the two countries, for the expansion of Somali borders, started; in April 1964 a cease-fire was signed, but no definitive decisions were taken. In 1969, Somalia became a Soviet ally, after the coup d'état overthrowing the anglophile government and leading to the installation of a new regime adhering to scientific Marxism-socialism. Since 1972 importations of Soviet arms drastically increased and by 1973 Somali amounts of aircrafts and tanks were largely superior than Ethiopian ones, provided by the US. In 1976 Somalia signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union. Alliances would be reversed in early 1977, after communist Cuban President Fidel Castro's visit both to Ethiopia and Somalia, proposing a secret peace supported by the Soviet Union. The agreement on peace would state the stability of territorial boundaries and the maintaining of Ethiopian authority over the zone of the dispute. Somalis refused, and USSR chose to strengthen the relations with Ethiopia, ensuring armaments and military expertise, to the detriment of Somalia. A twenty-year Treaty of Friendship was established between the two new allies. Soviet Union backed Ethiopia in the War of Ogaden of 1977, initiated by an invasive attack of Somalia, that had previously asked for aid and military supplies to the US. In 1978 Ethiopia would definitively counter-attack and defeat the adversary.⁹² Soviet interests in the Horn of Africa were not economic. In fact, all those states were extremely poor and did not

⁹¹ James Mayall, "The Soviet Union and Africa: How Great a Change?," in *The Soviet Union and the Third World*, ed. Edgar Feuchtwanger and Peter Nailor, 183-201 (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), 187-191, .

⁹² Christopher Clapham, "The Soviet Experience in the Horn of Africa," in *The Soviet Union and the Third World*, ed. Edgar Feuchtwanger and Peter Nailor, 202-224 (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), 207-215.

possess mineral or agricultural exploitable resources. USSR opted for extending its weight and for intervening in regional matters to take advantage of the tactical and crucial location adjacent to the southern passage to the Red Sea, being a fundamental connecting point to East Africa, under Western domination, and Middle East.⁹³

1.4.2 Soviet relations with the Middle East

Middle East is an area holding the territories around the eastern and southern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. It covers Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iran, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Turkey, Sudan and Yemen⁹⁴ and it had been a Russian⁹⁵ target since the Tsarist Empire (1721-1917). The importance of such territories resided in their tactical geographic position, mainly useful for owning ports in warm waters. Soviet Union continued to nourish the relations with the Middle East, supporting the spread of irredentist and nationalist anti-Western movements, resulted from the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, evident in the protests against the Portsmouth Treaty of 1948, establishing the prosecutions of British administration of the Iraqi foreign affairs, or even in the insurrections of 1952 against British enterprises in the Egyptian Suez Canal. Between 1958 and 1967, in Iraq there was the establishment of a leftist regime, in other Arab countries there was the consolidation of quasi-socialist tendencies, leading USSR to pay more attention to its associate states' domestic policy.

In June 1967, the Arab league was defeated in the Six-Day War and the Soviet Union started to re-evaluate its foreign policy. After the rout, Arab regimes became even more wishful of Soviet support, especially for the military and economic recreation, coming to a position of profound dependence. On the Soviet side, the interest towards Middle East kept growing, since Egypt was the only country, other than Israel, to detain a costal passage both to the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean and it was fundamental to supply North Vietnam after the closure of Chinese routes by the PRC, in response to the split with USSR.

At the end of 1969, however, the internal situation in Arab countries started to be dominated by chaos. Islamic militants and radicals ran into popular revolts against the *ancient regime* and its corruption. They began gaining more and more power⁹⁶ and succeeded in imposing their leaderships over Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Algeria, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, North Yemen and Egypt, in the name of a total refusal for Marxist communism and Soviet

⁹³ Tom J. Farer, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa* (New York: Carnegie Endowment, 1976), 117-121.

⁹⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Middle East" (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East>.

⁹⁵ The term "Russian", in this statement, implies the territorial continuity between Tsarist Russia and the future Soviet Union (1922-1991).

⁹⁶ Pick, "Introduction: Political and Ideological Aspects", 9-10.

ideology. Egypt and Syria asked for the Soviet help, with the aim of reconstituting the shattered and devastated troops, thanks to the guidance of the Soviet military advisers.

In 1970, Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat became the new Egyptian President and, suddenly, the relationship with Soviet Union worsened. The objectives of Soviet foreign policy aimed for the naissance of a vanguard Arab communist party, promoted some years before, in 1965, by the intentional disbanding of the Egyptian national communist party in honour of a more integrated Arab Socialist Union (ASU). President Sadat, on the contrary, explicitly declared of being contrary to the communist direction and even encouraged the dismissal of ASU, happened in 1971.⁹⁷ Despite the relational decline, USSR went on with its being interested in addressing Soviet foreign affairs to Egypt and, to maintain a slight clout, convinced Sadat to sign the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The pact set the approach of Cairo to Moscow, in return for a Soviet important support for the amelioration and growth of Egyptian military potential. In 1972, Sadat visited Moscow asking for reassurances that the Soviet Union would not sign any agreement concerning the Middle East with Nixon, since a further Arab-Israeli war was planned in the near future. Brezhnev did not guarantee any promise and the Egyptian President opted for expelling the 15,000 Soviet military specialists stable in Egypt. Soviet Union tried not to completely lose its authority, being Egypt the undisputed leader of the Arab system. However, it was forced to dramatically diminish the assistance previously destined to Egypt, both because of the deterioration of relations and because of the necessity of increasing in support to other Middle Eastern countries and Africa too. The Soviet Union seconded Egypt in the Yom Kippur War against Israel in 1973, but, however, the Arab clients failed and risked of being annihilated. USSR would try to stand out against the signature of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty of peace, the Camp David Accords of 1978 and, as consequence of Soviet opposite initiatives to Sadat, the Treaty of Friendship would be definitively abrogated by the latter. The Soviet Union lost Egypt.⁹⁸

Syria was an Egyptian ally in the struggle with Israel and before 1978 it maintained a stable and profitable alliance with Moscow. USSR supported Syria in its occupation in Lebanon in 1976, but, only two years later, they would suffer from departure. It was a consequence of the disrespect of the lack of consultation and information about the signing of the peace agreement in Washington, in conjunction with Egypt.⁹⁹

The failure in Soviet foreign policy caused, contemporaneously, heavy consequences on Soviet domestic policy. Economic losses would increase in the USSR, after the suspension, claimed by

⁹⁷ Igor P. Belayez and Yevgenij M. Primakov, *Егунет: Время президента Насера (Египет: Vremja presidenta Nasera)* (Moscow: Mysl'1974), 281-283, 313.

⁹⁸ Karen Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East: Great Power in Search of a Leading Role," in *The Soviet Union and the Third World*, ed. Edgar Feuchtwanger and Peter Nailor, 117-136 (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), 117-128.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

Sadat, of the refund Egypt had to pay for military and non-military debits. In conjunction with the Soviet financial aggravation, the USSR had to import huge amounts of oil from Middle East during the 1970s, being unsure of the potential level of domestic oil production.

Soviet Union foreign policy was not only linked to Egypt, but it was even straining to consolidate its being related to the revolutionary Iran, whose connections had been initiated already in 1946 with Stalin's asking for oil concessions. In 1958-1959 the relationship reached its lowest peak, since Iran negotiated an agreement of defence with Washington and proposed a non-aggression treaty to Moscow. In 1962, Iran pledged to the Soviet Union that no foreign country could detain military bases over the Iranian territory; as a consequence, the relations, at least economic ones, boosted and bettered. The first trade agreement of the duration of five years, was signed in March 1967 and, from 1972, it was followed by supplementary ones. By 1975, Iran-Soviet trade valued a total of \$700 million. Iran was hostile to become too much dependent upon Soviet Union and preferred to transact with other communist countries, rather than to grant exclusivity to USSR. However, it was one of Soviet Union's main associate, by 1977 the volume of transfer trade grew up to reaching 2 million tons per annum, even causing problems to frontier facilities that were not able to manage with the expanded transit.¹⁰⁰ Throughout the 1970s, bilateral relations suffered from pressures and complications. A major shock was the rapprochement of USSR with Iraq, consolidated by the signing of a treaty in 1972. If, from the Soviet point of view, it was the concrete demonstration of a strengthening of national forces fighting against dominating imperialism, from the Iranian perspective, it represented a threat to Islamic conservative regimes of the Arab world. It is fundamental to underline that in 1979 Iran ran a revolution, that concluded with the installation of an Islamic Republic, denying both Marxism and capitalism.¹⁰¹

During the course of the 1970s, Soviet Union did not succeed in achieving an alliance with Iraq. It did not become one of Soviet dependable partner, despite its orientation towards socialism.

In 1968, the second Ba'th regime¹⁰² came in power and those years, until 1973, would be characterised by important changes in Iraqi status quo. Soviet observers remained pleasantly stroke by the nationalisation of oil possessions of the West and by the promotion of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed with the Soviet Union in 1972. It was followed, one year later, by the warranty of political cooperation between ICP, that is Iraqi Communist Party, and CPSU.

¹⁰⁰ Brian Pockney, "Soviet Trade with the Third World," in *The Soviet Union and the Third World*, ed. Edgar J. Feuchtwanger and Peter Nailor, 30-78 (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), 46.

¹⁰¹ Ruhi K. Ramazani, "Soviet Foreign Policy and Revolutionary Iran: Continuity and Change," in *Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy towards South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 225-241 (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1990), 225-229, 232-234.

¹⁰² The Ba'th Arab Party was founded in Syria in 1963. It claimed the formation of a unique Arab socialist nation, exhibiting a strong nationalist sentiment. It ruled in Iraq since 1968, after the revolution against the previous corrupted regime of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Arif, until 2003. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Ba'th Party" (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2015). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bath-Party>.

Georgi Mirsky, the main expert of the Arab world and adviser of the USSR, in a conference held in 1975 stated that Iraq was the most positive case among Arab allies, thanks to the presence of counter-tendencies that paved the way for optimism. Thus, concentration to point international diplomatic relations in the direction of Iraq increased and intrigued Soviet Union, aiming to allocate its dominative role. At the end, the situation remained controversial, since Iraqi evolution from a capitalist regime to a revolutionary socialist-inclined country could not be ensured merely by the coup d'état of 1968. Many Soviet scholars believed that the utility and positivity of the anti-capitalist direction of Iraq was undoubted, but it should be consolidated through a progressive process, demonstrating the stability of the change of ideological direction. Therefore, Iraq remained a question mark within Soviet foreign policy of the 1970s.¹⁰³

1.4.3 A glance at Soviet Union in South Asia

South Asia was another crucial key region of interest for Soviet foreign policy.

India, since the inauguration of diplomatic relations in 1947, before Indian independence, continued developing slowly relations with USSR, in the name of bilateral cooperation in trade, political, economic and technological fields.

In 1971, the consolidation of the relationship between the two sides was permanently strengthened and materialised through the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, signed on August 9. The base of the collaborative agreement was the perceiving of national interests in the long term, accompanied by the maintaining of international security and stability.

The particularity of the treaty consisted of the possibility for both countries to establish and strengthen further relations with other states; in this sense it was not an impediment for the legitimisation of personal goals in relational buildings up.¹⁰⁴ The Soviet Union had never been allowed to establish naval bases or military ones in India - in fact Soviet advisers went just in a small number and for a limited period of time. Therefore, the Indo-Soviet Treaty was a failure concerning the mutual defence and security, since trainings for Indian military forces were not planned and it seemed that the actualisation of bilateral coordination was only verifiable by the presence of Soviet arsenal of military vessels, aircrafts, helicopters and armaments on the Indian soil.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Roderic Pitty, "Soviet Perceptions of Iraq," in *Middle East Report*, no. 151 (March-April 1988), 23-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3012151>.

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Moskalenko et al., "Soviet Relations with India and Pakistan and the Afghan Problem," in *Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy Towards South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 128-140 (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1990), 131-132.

¹⁰⁵ Surjit Mansingh, "Is there a Soviet-Indian Strategic Partnership?," in *Domestic Determinants of Soviet Foreign Policy Towards South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 141-155 (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1990), 145-146.

Relationship with Pakistan was less stable and characterised by consecutive ups and downs. Economic contacts had begun in the 1940s. However, Pakistani foreign policy, because of the Indo-Pakistani struggle over the region of Kashmir, was addressed towards the West, that was positively seen after the British concession to Indian independence. At the beginning of the 1970s, Pakistan split internally with the claiming of separation of the Eastern wing. Consequently, the new President Ali Zulfikar Bhutto opted for strengthening foreign connections to hold back national critic pressures. The Soviet Union, therefore, whose principal objective was an extensive foreign policy that could touch as many worldwide countries as possible, was favourable to initiate a phase of cooperative friendship that would bring several benefits. Economically, Pakistan became a major importer of metallurgical and technological products coming from USSR that, in exchange, obtained the permission to launch projects for the planning geological prospecting, to construct thermal stations and to supply Pakistan with agricultural tractors.¹⁰⁶

By 1975 South Asia became the main trade partner in oil of the Soviet Union. South Asian imports were higher than their exports, leading to an important economic yield for USSR.

The country to which Soviet Union directed its foreign policy and that covers a role of major interest for the main topic and orientation of the analysis of this thesis is, without any doubt, Afghanistan. Soviet political and administrative contacts destined to Afghan state would be deeply approached in the second chapter.

1.5 Conclusion

The decade of the 1970s can be considered a proper era, since it signed the beginning and the end of a new and different phase of the Cold War. Such period was featured by the improving and successive deterioration of bilateral relations between the two polarised spheres of influence, that clearly are the Soviet Union under the General Secretary of the Communist Party Brezhnev and the United States, backed by the presidency of Nixon. The détente would cover a ten-year period, from 1969 to 1979 and, besides the efforts of both the superpowers to avoid a nuclear war and to reduce global possessed arms, it well marked the impossibility of achieving a peaceful and disinterested cooperation. The reasons why collaboration was only partial can be identified in the ideological opposition, continuing to be a main element of struggle, especially for the USSR. And linked to the centrality of defence of Soviet own beliefs, it could not be undervalued its desire for expansion. Soviet foreign policy began to be addressed towards the Third World, not really for concrete incentives, since, besides having found further trade partners, most of the states in question presented no exploitable economic or natural resources. The most becoming example is

¹⁰⁶ Moskalenko et al., "Soviet Relations with India and Pakistan and the Afghan Problem", 134-136.

Africa and Soviet propensity to intervene in local conflicts, just in order to exert more socialist influence.

Africa, Middle East, South Asia became the most favoured regions over which to extend USSR authority. Geographical proximity, strategical position, anti-imperialistic and anti-western sentiments coming from years of colonial submission, revealed to be fundamental pushes for increasing an overseas Soviet approach. The explication, becoming a sort of justification for Brezhnev's aspiration of doctrinally conquering non-aligned states of the Third World, was found within the tenet taking his same name, the Brezhnev Doctrine. At ideological level, it gave a linear elucidation of the rationales leading USSR to mediate in foreign internal matters of the aforementioned sides of world. The bases of the aleatory and open-ended canon allowed to broaden its field of action over countries initially non-contemplated. At the beginning, the Brezhnev Doctrine had to act as a *post factum* alibi for Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Afterwards, it matured into a non-specific plea to legitimise any intercession in foreign issues, concerning the defence and preservation of socialist components or the prop to assist the development of communist revolutionary regimes.

This is the case of Afghanistan. Relations with the USSR and the invasion by the latter for the preservation of the communist mould in Afghanistan would be the main and definitive cause for the breaking up of the détente and of the “convivial” Cold War.

But, if the Soviet Union strived for a long time to achieve a peaceful co-existence with the United States, why, at the end, did it decide to crush the achieved results? Simply because expansionistic interests were considered superior than stability ones. The quasi-peace was in the name of personal safeguard, limiting the risk of a nuclear war and nothing more. The battle for ideological supremacy proceeded undisturbed.

Chapter 2

The Liaison Between USSR and Afghanistan

During the 1970s, a link between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan would be built up, or imposed, depending on the side of analysis. The question arises upon the reciprocal will and the reasons behind the behavioural attitudes of both viewpoints. A strong relationship was undoubtedly achieved, but the reasons, causes and consequences at the base could not have been shared nor exposed in a linear manner. Examining the historical background, the precedents of Afghan internal situation and its weaknesses exploitable by the USSR, the result would be a three-dimensional picture, englobing concrete actions and ideological struggles, war operations and contradictions.

2.1 Afghan instability: between DRA and guerrillas

Afghan historical experience represents a fundamental starting point to analyse Soviet behaviour at the end of the 1970. The path USSR decided to follow, the strategies it opted for adopting, the tactical evaluations, the logic and the reasoning the Soviet leadership drew are the result of a causal link with Afghanistan. The breeding ground to slowly intermeddle in Afghan domestic issues was found already at the beginning of the 1960s when, after a process of quasi-liberalisation, Afghanistan started to get out from its constrained reality. A reality made up of Islamic religion and traditions, without the possibility of opening to “more international” ideological trends. The arising of an Afghan communist party would be the breakthrough. USSR could penetrate within its state political apparatus and, ably and cleverly, it would become the principal cause of the several transformations the Afghan government had to face. The dexterity that the Soviet Union employed to turn the tide of Afghan history in its favour did not consist of the choice of military schemes, but in the skilfulness of gaming the state of affairs. It would exploit internal frailties, deficiencies and immaturity to increase the reputability of the Soviet network, selling its image as an indispensable “friend”, essential in the military, economic and political fields. Soviet ambiguity and reticence in publicly diffusing its plans and goals would reveal of being the main weapon. To get a full picture of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan since 1979 it is necessary to examine and interpret the pre-existing situation *in situ* as to have the awareness of how they enabled USSR itself to play such an active and primary role in the south-Asian country.

2.1.1 The naissance of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

The 1970s represented a pivotal spell for Afghanistan that, in 1973, completed its metamorphosis from an absolute monarchy into a democratic republic, backed and sustained by the Soviet Union. Closer relations between Soviet Union and monarchic Afghanistan started in 1964. This was the year of the promulgation of a more liberal constitution by King Zahir Shah. The link between such constitution and USSR was very tight, since this first Afghan democratic attempt allowed the naissance and diffusion of extremist leftist and rightist parties. Among them, the more influential and pertinent to the reasoning over the Soviet connection to the state in question was the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), ideologically akin to Soviet socialism.¹⁰⁷ At the beginning, PDPA was even called for short *Khalq*, that means "masses". The main goal of the PDPA was the instauration of a national democratic government, in order to solve political and social internal contradictions. Orthodox Leninism was the foundation of the manifesto of the Afghan communist party, in the name of anti-imperialism, independentism and transition to democratisation, supported by a recognised Afghan nationalism. The structure of the PDPA exactly followed the Soviet model: there was a General Secretary, a First Secretary, the Politburo and a Central Committee, whose candidates had to be submitted to a probationary term. Fellowship was not extended to everyone; it was exclusive.

The party was heavily connected to the Soviet Union that was the only ground of strength. Neither agricultural people nor religious ones supported PDPA and negatively considered the interference of the foreign USSR within domestic issues. Disinformation and intimidating means were the base of the formational organisation and they would be exploited to pressure and threaten future unstable and weak Afghan governments. The communist PDPA was seconded by a cliquey number of Kabul citizens; outside the capital, hostility against the party itself and its powerful Soviet supporter dominated. The First General Secretary was Nur Muhammad Taraki that exhorted for the possession of Afghan power entirely by the working class, even if most of the population was characterised by peasants, showing a rural mentality.¹⁰⁸

In 1967, three years after its growing up, PDPA would split within two rival and antagonist factions: the *Khalq* remained; it was led by Hafizullah Amin and Taraki and sustained by members of the army, and the *Parcham*, meaning "banner", headed by Babrak Karmal. The contrast was not at ideological level, but more at personal one; it evinced two dissimilar approaches to revolution, coming from opposite social belongings. The Parcham's members belonged to the

¹⁰⁷ Michael C. Chapman, "Reviewed Work: Afghanistan under Soviet Domination 1964-1981," in *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 59, n. 3 (Summer 1983): 533, doi:10.2307/2618880.

¹⁰⁸ Alam Payind, "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 21, no. 1 (February 1989), 113, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/163642>.

Kabuli bourgeoisie; whereas, the most of Khalqi were Pashtuns¹⁰⁹ and came from the provinces. Karmal was more interested in the reaching of the “national democracy”, whereas his opponents were more bound to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Despite Soviet efforts to impede the separation, since it would render the control more difficult, its formalisation was endorsed by the internal division and following affiliation depending on ethnic inclusion.¹¹⁰ Some Afghan scholars asserted that the KGB agents operating in Afghanistan, on the contrary, heartened the PDPA separation to favour the Afghan communists by letting them socially follow their most similar wake. The contraposition between Soviet leadership and the KGB displays a net disinformation and circulation of political schedules. The maintaining of secrecy, aiming for an independent administration of issues, keeping out third persons, so as to conceal the truth and the resulting problems, in some cases would turn against the manipulators. Internally to the huge Soviet apparatus, including agencies, offices and advisers operating on foreign soils, as Afghanistan, there was, as mentioned, a shortage of clearness in the open exposition of ideas and actual objectives. The adjective “actual” refers to the clarification of concrete intended goals and not to convenient ones, exhibited only because more similar to those publicly shared and expected. Not to dissuade the supporters of socialism and the believers in the brotherhood of countries relying on the same Marxist-Leninist tenets, manipulation of happening facts was considered the most functional way to keep joined satellite and allied states and populations.

The prop to internationally-spread communist parties was the first step to demonstrate USSR solidarity and interest in foreign affairs, not to get profits, but in the name of a superior ideological sharing that should be seen as the driving force of any action and alliance.

In this regard, in Afghanistan, the primary backer and motivator of the PDPA was the Soviet Union, rather than national people. Generally, the support to both split communist parties was not granted by professionally educated and acculturated social classes, that continued being affiliated to monarchy. Royalist pre-eminence, archaism and autocracy remained unaltered, in spite of the progressive advancement of consensuses and adherence to the communist revolutionary parties. Political and administrative powers were not shared with external public forces, as the King had promised, and this would exacerbate the dispute with the crown. Progress did not proceed, neither from the economic nor from the socio-political side.

¹⁰⁹ The Pashtuns are those who belong to the Pashto-speaking population, mainly living in the region between the Hindu Kush in the northeaster portion of Afghanistan and the northern area of the Indus River, placed in Pakistan. They embody the largest social portion of the whole Afghan community. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Pashtun” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2014). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pashtun>.

¹¹⁰ Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan - A Modern History: Monarchy, Despotism or Democracy? The Problems of Governance in the Muslim Tradition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 48-49.

By 1970s, Soviet Union strongly economically financed Afghanistan for an amount of \$110 million, forasmuch as Afghan economy was unstable and vulnerable, being mainly based on agricultural and pastoral labours. USSR deeply invested in Afghanistan since 1967, when they signed an agreement assuring the delivery of Afghan natural gas in exchange of Soviet assistance for the construction of highways and airfields on the Afghan soil.¹¹¹ Technical assistance and economic financing were of use to the cause, that is they helped USSR to introduce a contact at local level, physically settling on the territory, but without presenting any sign of political or expansionistic desire.

Internal Afghan domestic scenario began to lotter already in 1968, when the first strikes, organised by students, arose in the capital city of Kabul, diffusing even in the provinces of the country. Unemployment, awful economic and, consequently, social conditions triggered reactionary responses among the masses. Polarisation of forces was the immediate outcome, spreading in the principal contrast between Islamic activist students and Marxists. In 1969 traditionalist conservatives strengthened their influent position at the Parliamentary elections, through corruption and economic concessions to become active part within the elected body. Outside of the political structure, situation was dominated by the increasing popularity of the Organisation of Muslim Youth, constituted by young militants that won the student University elections in 1970. Differently from other clandestine groups, like the Islam of the Jamiat, such young organisation operated openly and without any bother, addressing its actions against PDPA and its followers. The stressor that sharpened the relation between the two sections was recognisable in the publication by Afghan communists of an “Ode to Lenin” in a Marxist communist journal. The exacerbation of the disputes was the consequence of the employment of the language of praise, reserved only for the Prophet, according to Islam. The provocation was not welcomed and brought to struggles and armed fights in the university campuses and even along the streets of the capital. The aftermath was the closure of the University itself for the duration of six months. Islamists’ reply became even more radical, denying any further experiment of democratisation and, on the contrary, intensifying the rigidity of their religious traditions, such as the obligation of wearing the veil for the women. The drought and resulting famine spread during those years, precisely in 1969, did not improve the already disastrous Afghan background. Almost 50,000 people died and the government, facing incommensurable difficulties, asked for higher Soviet foreign international aid,¹¹² that immediately took the action.

¹¹¹ Lawrence Ziring, “Buffer States on the Rim of Asia: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the Superpowers,” in *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, ed. Hafeez Malik, 90-126 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 102-103.

¹¹² Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan - A Modern History: Monarchy, Despotism or Democracy? The Problems of Governance in the Muslim Tradition*, 59-61.

Dependence upon Soviet Union, at that time, was very high. In March 1972, the King Zahir Shah visited Brezhnev in Moscow and, notwithstanding having hesitated, he agreed upon signing a reciprocal collective security compromise. A hundred Soviet military specialists and advisers were sent to Afghanistan to coordinate Security Force Assistance (SFA) troops and to initiate an ampler advisory expedition. The responsible for the mission was, until 1975, General-Major Ivan Semenovitch Bondarets. Soviet Union undertook to provide equipment and training programmes for Afghan soldiers, whose concentration was higher along the boundaries with Pakistan and in Kabul. Internal security units, according to Soviet conception, was not a proper priority of Afghanistan and, in this regard, they were reduced in number and limited in rank.¹¹³ Such massive restrictions and the King's tendency to humour USSR's suggestions stirred up common dissatisfaction and fuelled the impatience of Afghan inhabitants.

2.1.2 A first Afghan republican attempt

The generalised social malcontent extremely raised. The deposition of the King Zahir Shah on July 17, 1973, while he was in Italy on holidays, in favour of his brother-in-law Mohammed Daoud Khan, seemed to be the only and necessary resolution.

Daoud had always been hostile to the deposed sovereign and his cardinal supporters were dissidents, liberals and young progressist soldiers. Both the Afghan communist factions supported the coup d'état, and likewise did the Soviet Union. Daoud was immediately accused by China of being associate with USSR, as a sort of a mere Soviet tool, but he denied and self-proclaimed President of Afghanistan. It is fundamental to underline his refusal of appointing himself *Shah*, that is a monarch, but President. His nominative gesture, in fact, transformed the essence of Afghanistan, rendering it, for the first time in its history, a republic and not a monarchy anymore.¹¹⁴ The reaction of the Afghan Muslims was immediate, since the building up of a republic implicated even the establishment of free elections. Such a practice would allow to pro-Soviet parties to participate within the formation of the government. Until then, the elected parliament was nominated and mastered by conservative religious chairmen, devoted to the preservation of traditions and customs of Afghanistan, and that would reject cooperation with any communist atheist.¹¹⁵ The national disequilibrium and the need for socioeconomic stability convinced the new President to carry out a resolute leadership that, if it did not transform the government into democratic, however, rendered it a stable republican one.¹¹⁶ Daoud still needed Brezhnev's

¹¹³ Olga Oliker, *Building Afghanistan's Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2011), 5.

¹¹⁴ Mustafa Zubeida, "Afghanistan and the Asian Power Balance," *Pacific Community* 6 (January 1975): 283.

¹¹⁵ Payind, "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation", 114.

¹¹⁶ Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, second edition (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1997), 4.

backing and could not completely avoid it; in June 1974 he went to Moscow to ask for a higher payment for Afghan natural gas and managed to obtain it. In addition, the Soviet Union, to demonstrate its encouragement to the President's development programme for Afghanistan, authorised a concession of \$500,000, parallel with the construction of chemical and fertiliser factories, agricultural irrigation systematisations and of a petroleum refinery. The sequence of agreements that would be reached between the two countries would, contemporaneously, entail a deeper and more concrete Soviet influence over the Afghan state, resulting evident even by the physical presence, on the mentioned territory, of USSR officials, soldiers and citizens too.

Another fundamental accordance was signed over the combined administration of local natural resources.¹¹⁷ The Soviet Union was slowly imposing its mastery over Afghanistan, but in a concealed manner, making itself indispensable for the ease of the country. The struggle for the ideological supremacy with the United States was still preponderant and a further state to inspire would represent a victorious step for the USSR.

Both the Afghan air and armed forces were supervised and recruited by the Soviet Union, extending its ascendancy on further Afghan national spheres. The impact over the inhabitants was negative, since the Afghan religious and nationalist society, due to its aversion to the excessive Soviet implication in domestic affairs, replied through violence and terrorism, to express its dissatisfaction. Aggravating circumstances to the precarious surroundings were the assassination of the Professor Mohammad Ali and of Al-Gazhiz, respectively an acknowledged anti-Soviet historian and an anti-Soviet publisher. In revenge, in this respect, the Minister of Planning under Daoud's Presidency was shot and assassinated in 1974. The Afghan government opted for not surrendering to aggressive provocations and, in order to appease the spreading wrath, Daoud promulgated a renewed constitution. The Islamic Party and Muslim clergy were harshly suppressed, but the consequence of the clampdown was counter-productive, forasmuch as it increased popularity of the Islamic grouping. Khalq and Parcham were downgraded to unofficial communist parties and replaced by the National Revolutionary Party (NRP), becoming the only legal and recognised one. The two communist divisions had always sustained Daoud's modernising project for Afghanistan; Khalq by non-thwarting the President's acts, Parcham by coming abreast of and closely working with him.

Parcham was much more dependent upon Soviet Union and weaker than Khalq, that managed to penetrate the civil, student and military classes. Daoud's move was not appreciated neither by Moscow that led a conspiracy to make an attempt on his life. The USSR operations were launched in 1977 to stop the Afghan President's intensification of conservatism and relational rapprochement to the United States. Daoud had announced a meeting with the US President Carter

¹¹⁷ Ziring, "Buffer States on the Rim of Asia: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the Superpowers", 104-105.

in Washington and, in addition, a visit from the Shah of Iran. The aims of Daoud's plans were directed to further limit Soviet influence and addiction. He strongly criticised Brezhnev's operations in the Horn of Africa and plainly blacken the Soviet name and conduct. Daoud became a concrete menace to USSR credit and, before he would give the input for a ripple-effect discrediting its image and behaviour, he had to be eliminated.

In the meanwhile, internal situation worsened, open-violent demonstrations and manifestations by leftists increased after the assassination of Mir Akbar Khyber, a famed Parcham ideologist; the leaders of both Khalq and Parcham were arrested with the charge of being harmful to national security. Socialist reactions against the government exacerbated and the Soviet Union expired peaceful manoeuvres to avert the execution of the Soviet PDPA imprisoned allies.¹¹⁸

Once the Soviet Union had been involved to overthrow the Afghan regime, the destiny of Daoud was doomed.

2.1.3 The Afghan evolution into DRA

On April 27, 1978, the Afghan military units, supported by the USSR, perpetrated the murder against the President Daoud, that was killed, together with several members of his family and high placed officials, while he was hypothesizing measures to settle the internal crisis. The Soviet Union did not directly commit the crime not to tarnish its reputation; it co-participated. The important fact was that the attempt would be carried out by Afghan individuals, as to internationally and publicly show that USSR only seconded national will, without deciding nor forcing it.

Presidential guards put up a fight but failed because of the Soviet-supplied aviation service and the provided precision air bombs. A KGB insider, Vladimir Kuzichkin, reported to the US Time Magazine, three years after the event, that Soviet Union's intervention was mandatory since Afghan communists were running a desperate situation. Daoud's objective was to kill the leaders of the PDPA, leaving socialist supporters with no guides. The appeal of communists of Kabul was immediately addressed to the Soviet embassy in situ¹¹⁹ and Moscow was quick in ordering the deadly coup. The underlining of the necessity of intermediation was a propagandist means to persuade the public opinion that the Soviet Union was behaving driven by a sense of Brezhnevian doctrinal solidarity. The belying of personal advantage by the USSR was functional to the diffusion of a sympathetic image of Soviet Politburo as to increase general consensus.

¹¹⁸ William Borders, "Coups Reported in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/04/28/archives/coup-is-reported-in-afghanistan-rebels-say-they-killed-president.html>.

¹¹⁹ "The Soviets. Coups and Killings in Kabul," *Time* 120, no. 21 (November 1982): 33, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,955063,00.html>.

Soviet Union and the PDPA claimed that the reversal of Daoud's traditionalist governance was a proper communist revolution. But, concretely, it was a mere coup d'état, since it involved a reduced number of participants belonging to the elite Soviet-prepared Afghan servicemen. The attempt went down in history under the appellation of "Saur Revolution".

The prompt result was the release of the imprisoned communist leaders and the consequent formation of the new Afghan government by Taraki, the chief of Khalq faction.¹²⁰ Afghanistan transformed from a Soviet buffer state into a real Soviet satellite state, being the concrete outcome of USSR's plan of toppling Daoud to put into power a communist ruler. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) was officially established and the USSR recognised Taraki's pro-Soviet government forthwith.

The strong preponderant Marxist nature and the huge economic and military reliance on USSR inflamed the controversies of Islamic and Afghan fiery anti-communists towards DRA. Not to expressly show submission to Soviet Union, Taraki aimed at pruning the communist nature of the coup d'état and tried to manifest a more pro-Islamic attitude to gain the army's confidence. The new President's promises would implicate a more equal allocation of wealth and the eradication of corruption. Since the beginning, DRA increasingly lost citizens' confidence and support, being deprived of its legitimacy, proportionally to the mounting inclusion of Soviet advisors within the government. The changes promoted by the latter were radical, bringing to the substitution of the Islamic flag and to the introduction of socialist indoctrination lessons at school.¹²¹ The mentioned dictated measures shattered Afghan religious habits and cultural folklore and, as a matter of fact, they were rejected and combated by Afghan people.

For its part, the Soviet Union addressed its efforts to demonstrate the lack of involvement within the revolutionary act against Daoud. The same official Soviet Agency Tass definitively rejected any charge of co-participation in Afghan domestic issues. Afghan revolution, according to local and Soviet propaganda, was internationally sold as the clear and unequivocal embodiment of Afghan people's desire.

President Taraki revealed not to be able to reconcile Khalq and Parcham and, as the Khalqi gained more power, Parchamis were largely purged, being pushed away as ambassadors into foreign countries, being part of the Soviet Blok, or being executed. Soviet support to the Khalq government began to reduce, due to its subversive actions against followers of the same ideological socialist movement.

In addition, Taraki, yielding to Amin, chief of the political police, and to his pressures to stay allied with USSR, even aroused the dissent of Islamic traditionalist upholders. According to both Khalq

¹²⁰ Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan Under the Khalq," *Problems of Communism* 28 (July-August 1979): 57-62.

¹²¹ Payind, "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation", 118-119.

chiefs, being Afghanistan a developing country, it clearly showed the absence of a developed working class capable of forming and managing a government. Therefore, there was the necessity of a spokesperson to overthrow the constricting corrupted regime, on the base of a socialist revolutionary plan of action. Taraki and Amin's social radical targets led to a rule of terror, dominated by a complete control over the state, the army and the agrarian reforms. The arrogance of the government leaders was not positively welcomed neither by Afghan peasants nor by broader masses that showed more persistent symptoms of intolerance.¹²²

Babrak Karmal sensed the peril and advised the Khalq chiefs to step back with the reformist procedure. No result was achieved. On the contrary, Karmal was obliged by Taraki to retire from cabinet politics and was end to Czechoslovakia as ambassador.

Amin, mindless of Taraki's and Brezhnev's reproaches, continued with his propositional schedule of modernisation, aggravating the malcontent of Islamic religious believers. Islamic resistance unreservedly lined up against socialism and the Afghan Marxist parties.¹²³ Guerrillas spread among the army and against Soviet civilians too, causing several deaths. Mutinies transformed into a daily occurrence among the army forces; government corpses betrayed the President Taraki and moved towards mujahidin fighting units.¹²⁴ Both the Khalq party and the Soviet Union were ruffled by the precarious circumstances. Many bureaucrats, officials and professionals disappeared; about a hundred of suspected criminals were apprehended and executed.

In December 1978, Brezhnev invited Taraki in Moscow to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation for the duration of twenty years, pointing out the mutual respect for national sovereignty, the principle of non-interference in internal domestic affairs and the recognition of Afghanistan as a non-aligned country. The evinced priority of the agreement resided in the prosecution of military cooperation, accompanied by the economic assistance granted to Afghanistan for the fulfilment of the five-year plan, addressed to a social amelioration.¹²⁵ The focal point of the treaty was the pledge of consultation in case of questions related to territorial cohesion, security or independent self-rule. Article 8, in particular, would be exploited one year later to find a plausible justification to Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, since it called for a collaboration in the name of the building up of a more efficient security system in South Asia. In September 1979, Taraki went again to Moscow to meet Brezhnev who managed to convince the Afghan President to reconcile with the Parcham faction, only achievable by Amin's disappearance from the scene. The outcome of the meeting was demonstrable in the Soviet ambition to nominate

¹²² Gilbert Anchar, *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 82.

¹²³ Ziring, "Buffer States on the Rim of Asia: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the Superpowers", 107-110.

¹²⁴ Arnold Fletcher, *Afghanistan: Highway of the Conquest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 80.

¹²⁵ *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 16 February 1979, 29459.

Taraki as President of the Supreme Council of Defence of Afghanistan, parallel with the massive reduction of Amin's authority. Karmal was called back from Czechoslovakia to take an active role within the Afghan government. Despite USSR strains, however, Amin was made Prime and Foreign Minister; so, Taraki was summoned again by Soviet General Secretary and warned to kill Amin. Nevertheless, the facts did not turn as expected, since Amin arrested, tortured and murdered Taraki near the presidential residence on October 10, 1979. Amin aimed at consolidating his power, inviting all those who would fight the pressing and intrusive Soviet threat. He tried to involve even the Islamic mujahidin, assuring an instant reconciliation with the religious fighters and the reinstatement of an Afghan equilibrium. Amin's intentions and argumentations were not sufficient to convince Islamic radicals to interrupt their raging revolts and protests; their objective was the restoration of an Islamic monarchy. Reconciliation between the two antithetical Afghan divisions was not attainable anymore.

Overseas, USSR urged on belittling Amin's figure, judging him an encroacher and exploiter, even declaring that he was not a legitimate leader, differently from Babrak Karmal that should become, in Soviet view, the future national President, showing a stronger devotion for the Soviet Union. Being conscious of his weak position, Amin sought to widen his range of backers, by commuting death condemnations, releasing political prisoners and by proposing to renovate the government status by including non-communists.¹²⁶

Soviet discontent turned up. The installation of anti-communist stances within the Afghan government apparatus would furtherly weaken USSR position, limiting its influence and likelihood of impacting over the political scenario in Afghanistan. The concrete risk was the loss of a client state.

Since indirect tactics to relieve Amin of his duties revealed to be unsuccessful, the Soviet Union opted for embracing more drastic procedures.

2.2 The Afghan invasion, a conscious Soviet action?

Amin's regime was losing its authority and the growing internal malcontent was complementary to external forces hostile to the regime itself and interested in financing and backing Islamic opponent squads against DRA, mainly the United States and Pakistan. Along the southern borders of Afghanistan, the concentration of Pakistani troops incommensurably arose. The Islamic rebels, towards the end of the 1979, had reached an irregular company of 40,000 men and accomplished to completely administer the provinces of Laghman, Paktika, Paktia and Kunar.

¹²⁶ Payind, "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation", 120-121.

Afghanistan became the battlefield of a renewed superpowers' contrast. The US veiled support to mujahidin in an attempt to reverse Soviet influential attitude transformed a local matter into an international one. A noteworthy fact is that the collision between the United States and the Soviet Union remained in the background and was not explicitly nominated. In the Afghan case, the ideological defence did not subsist anymore, since, according to historical development of events, American leadership financed the Islamic cause as a tool to undermine USSR widespread image and to belittle its strength, from the military and persuasive sides.

The Soviet Union had artificially blemished Amin's reputation, stressing his minimal contacts with the US and devoting particular annoyance towards his attitude of purging any political opponents, including "Tarakist Khalqi". In autumn 1979, almost 50,000 people had been executed. The series of unjustified murders brought members of the government and of the Afghan communist party to emigrate in droves to Pakistan and Iran, contemporaneously causing a reduction in the supportive social base to the regime and an increasing in the opposition social base.

Soviet officials, even on the advice of the Kremlin, recommended Amin to end his damaging policy, but despite having been ignored, they were accused, together with the Soviet leaders, of having been the origin of his several illegal actions. The PDPA General Secretary tried to convince the public opinion that the USSR itself had advocated him to act with strength and violence.¹²⁷ The Afghan democratic republic transformed into a dictatorship.

The CPSU repeatedly rebuked Amin and cautioned him to cease his brutal repressions, since they were leading to a self-destruction of communism and its adhesion. He continued to justify and legitimise his conducts by uttering the Soviet assumption of the morality of any action that could bring direct benefits to the Revolution. The number of ministers and deputy ministers changed during the first 18 months of government corresponded to 25 and 34; the count of executed political prisoners was equivalent to at least 6,000. The following of purges injured the possibility of survival of the regime; it was the main concern of the Soviet Union.¹²⁸

Anyway, in spite of Soviet distrust towards Amin, he remained loyal to USSR, considering it the only backup and means to push the social amelioration, hindering general stagnation and unrest. In this sense, Amin kept on looking for Soviet prop and even asked for a meeting with Brezhnev in Moscow. The Soviet Ambassador in Kabul, Alexander Puzanov, readily refused to organise an official encounter between the Afghan leader and the USSR General Secretary, arising Amin's first suspicions about Moscow's behaviours to him.

¹²⁷ Aleksandr A. Lyakhovskiy, "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979," *The Cold War International History Project Working Paper Series*, no. 51 (January 2007), 3-4.

¹²⁸ "Специальный бюллетень института востоковедения наук АН СССР" (Special Bulletin of the USSR Academy of Science Institute of Oriental Studies), no. 5 (1986), 135-136.

His major worries concerned the lack of confidence the KGB officers in Kabul and the local Soviet political advisers could have developed, but not to worsen the situation, he requested to the chief military authority, Lieutenant General Lev Gorelov, the Soviet military intercession to squash the spreading revolts in the whole Afghanistan.¹²⁹

On August 15, 1979 the Central Committee (CC) of the CPSU carried the Decree No. P163/62, according to which the General of the Army, Ivan Pavlosky, and other officers, were sent to the DRA for two months, from August 17 to October 22, with the purpose of rethinking the organisation of the People's Armed Forces of Afghanistan and their plans of attack to counter the Muslim rebels, providing corporeal aid in situ. Soviet practical assistance revealed to be effective and marked the transition from a passive-defensive fight of the Afghan army to more methodical and coordinated offensive manoeuvres.

In spite of Afghan troops' efforts to fulfil Soviet advice and important results in destroying Islamic counterrevolutionary bodies in the provinces of Paktia, Parwan, Bamiyan and Ghazni, Soviet military direction was not permanently inculcated. Pragmatic attitude of the Afghan army did not undergo adjustments.¹³⁰ Political and PDPA organs did not intercede to assist Soviet consultants in reshuffle it and Soviet guidelines remained on the theoretical level. USSR efforts to shake Afghan foundations to make it embracing Soviet basic features, even at the level of military behaviour revealed to be inconclusive. Impositions and radical modifications to the structure and frame of the country were not fulfilled in a drastic Soviet design of moulding Afghan socialist republic in its image. They remained at unilateral and propositional stage and, silently, proved the incongruence between USSR and Afghanistan's perspectives.

Soviet collaboration with Amin reached a lower peak.

In October 1979, Puzanov and Gorelov met together with the chief representative of the KGB, Mikhail Bogdanov, in order to discuss over the next moves of Soviet-trained Afghan divisions. The reports from the Residency of the KGB of late October related that Soviet consultants and citizens living in Afghanistan were tortured by Amin and the risk that he would shift Afghan alignment from the Soviet orbit to the American one seemed to be feasible and on the verge of being implemented. The Residency declared that Amin's single acts resulted deleterious for the escalation of the Communist Revolution and, conversely, they appeared more propitious for the capitalist imperialism. Truthfulness of documents could not be verified since only the KGB agents on the field observed and judged the surroundings. Diminishing Amin and his *modus operandi*, providing concrete proofs of his tyranny and aggressive attitude towards socialist fellows and not,

¹²⁹ Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2009), 55-56.

¹³⁰ Lyakhovskiy, "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979", 6-7.

was the best advertising material to prepare the ground for a more dynamic intercession by the Soviet Union. The Minister of Defence, Dimitrij Ustinov, ordered to make the preparations and the training for a quasi-official invasion. He was extremely convinced that the Soviet Union should physically intervene to defend its position in nearby Afghanistan, justifying a military offensive by the supposition that the United States would intercede in Iranian status quo.¹³¹ Yuri Andropov, reluctantly, accepted Ustinov's proposal. He would prefer to be less proactive, but finally agreed, counting on the support of the generalised opinion. The successive step was the convincement of Brezhnev. He quickly positively answered to the design, having become more unfriendly to Amin after Taraki's assassination.

The Soviet leadership, dissatisfied with the poor and insufficient upshots got by Puzanov, decided to call him back to Moscow and, on November 8, it appointed Fikryat Tabeyev, the First Secretary of the Oblast of Tatarstan, as the new Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan. He arrived in Kabul on November 26.¹³² The shared conviction among Soviet superiors was the indispensable exigency of removing Amin from his office, fearing even a turning of his regime into an anti-Soviet one. Preparations started to be managed by the KGB channels.

On November 28, the USSR first deputy minister of internal affairs, Lieutenant General Viktor Paputin, arrived in Kabul with the aim of convincing Amin to allow the Soviet Union garrison a larger number of troops in Afghanistan. No result was accomplished. USSR continued to bear down on Amin to persuade him to make way for Karmal.¹³³

The following day, on November 29, the CPSU CC published a written evaluation to be largely diffused within Soviet Union. It was signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Gromyko, the KGB Chairman Andropov and the head of the International Department of the Central Committee Boris Ponomarev, to explain and make intelligible the founding motives that led to the aforementioned conclusion of dismissing the DRA President. He was accused of having aggravated the internal split of PDPA, weakening the social and political position of the party in the whole country and thus having distracted the party leaders from the solving of urgent state issues and from the combat against the Islamic counterrevolution. He exploited the prevailing disorganisation and weakness of the party to gain more autocratic power. He was held responsible for the arising of a generalised discontent, drawing much criticism for his actions, alienating even the supporters of the Khalq faction, the *intelligentsia* and the Afghan army.

The principal charge against his figure was the sensation that he had showed interest in pursuing a more balanced policy with Western forces, mainly the United States that detained several

¹³¹ Martin Ewans, *Conflict in Afghanistan: Studies in asymmetric warfare* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 96-97.

¹³² Aleksandr A. Lyakhovskiy, *The Tragedy and Valor of the Afghani* (Moscow: GPI "Iskon", 1995), 102.

¹³³ Payind, "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation", 120-121.

representatives on the Afghan soil. A sudden turnabout of orientation was not to be ignored, especially due the *nezakalennost'*, that is the ideological unpreparedness of the PDPA, providing no obstacles to a possible Amin's deviation from socialism. His ambiguity resided, according to the document, within the fact that he claimed for a stronger and more solid collaboration with the Soviet Union, but, contemporaneously, he behaved the opposite. He did not try to put Soviet recommendations into action concerning the maintenance of unity of the PDPA and, furthermore, he fuelled anti-Soviet sentiments among his followers, reporting that the USSR would have programmed an attempt on his life in past September.

Although CPSU was intended to delegitimise Amin, not to further deplete PDPA and the DRA itself, the line to be expediently followed was a continuation of active co-working with the Afghan President, without showing any sign of mistrust, with the aim of pointing out more clearly his intentions. His requests of meeting Brezhnev in Moscow would not be satisfied, but the denial should not be direct, on the contrary, the reply would be positive but without specifying any concrete times. The signatories of the report proposed not to openly criticise Amin and his apparatus, but neither to give the impression that they did agree with him. The scope was to intervene obliquely, avoiding the risk of excessive Soviet interference in Afghan domestic affairs. Concerning economic cooperation, the promised funds and financial assistance had to be fulfilled, but Amin's new economic claims should be accurately examined.

Soviet advisers, ministries and agencies, including the KGB, had to continue apparently working in alliance with Afghan corresponding local officials and bureau, in order to accomplish the planned missions. The most significant action they had to perform was the constant control over Amin's activities and attitude, with the aim of precisely reporting to the Soviet Union.¹³⁴

Andropov incited the Soviet leaders to dismiss Amin and to supplant him with Karmal, albeit he remained doubtful relatively to the latter's capacity of being in position to taking up power.

In the handwritten memorandum sent by Andropov to Brezhnev himself, at the beginning of December, there was a warning about the imminence of the Afghan political turning point towards the US and of the immeasurable rising of negative feelings against the USSR.¹³⁵ A propaganda of the fear of a more pro-American Afghanistan was contrived to speed up the agreement upon intervention by the Soviet Politburo. A propaganda of Amin's atrociousness towards his fellow

¹³⁴ "Report on the Situation in Afghanistan, Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev to CPSU CC," 29 November 1979, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, APRF, f. 3, op. 82, d. 173, s. 118-127. Available at: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111576>.

¹³⁵ National Security Archive, *The September 11th Sourcebooks, Vol. II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War, I. The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Russian Documents and Memoirs*, Document 7.

citizens and party members was publicly sold to guarantee USSR benevolence in its close offensive act against the communist Afghan President.

The exiled Parcham faction seemed to have a strategy to counter Amin and asked for Soviet assistance, even from the military front. The Parchamis ensured that in Kabul they detained two battalions, but additional armed support could reveal of being useful as a precautionary element. On December 8, Brezhnev, Gromyko, Ustinov and Andropov officially met. Estimating the worst possible course of events, they solved that the conviction of the latter two about the need of removing Amin, employing the KGB agency, was the most advantageous move.

Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the chief of General Staff, was informed relatively to the taken decision and hardly contested it, defining such resolution a slight on Afghan people, notably unfavourable to foreign forces over their territory. The conclusion of the operation, in his opinion, would be an open face-off. Despite Ogarkov's disapproval, on December 10, Brezhnev gave the commands of arranging the invasion. Two days later, the Soviet Politburo officialised the final sentence of the wide-ranging assault towards Afghanistan. The view of Soviet military advisers, mainly of the General Vasilij Zaplatin, inclined to settle the Afghan dispute by political expedients; instead, the KGB called on for a martial reply.¹³⁶

The document certifying the authorisation of the Politburo to the invasion was written by hand by Konstantin Chernenko, Brezhnev's aide, and titled "Concerning the situation in A". It approved all the assessments spoken by Andropov, Gromyko and Ustinov and allowed any action that would be reckoned necessary. The memorandum was granting secrecy and nowhere the words Afghanistan or Amin were mentioned.¹³⁷

The reasons that definitively persuaded the Soviet Union to military react were motivated by the safeguard of socialist honour. The loss of Afghanistan, a recognised full-fledged socialist state, could not be admitted by the USSR, especially according to the already analysed Brezhnev Doctrine. Standing within the socialist orbit, Afghanistan had to be protected and defended by any kind of menace, both internal and external, even going against its government leader, although he proclaimed himself as a socialist-convinced President. The concreteness of his actions showed to be anti-Revolutionary and disrespectful towards socialist principles; this represented a more than justifiable cause to intercede. A hypothetical sudden swing in ideological guiding tenets in Afghanistan could seriously endanger Soviet Union's reputation and could start a ripple effect among the other USSR's satellite states, that might rebel against their condition of submission and ask for more autonomy.

¹³⁶ Ewans, *Conflict in Afghanistan: Studies in asymmetric warfare*, 98.

¹³⁷ National Security Archive, *The September 11th Sourcebooks, Vol. II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War, I. The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Russian Documents and Memoirs*, Document 9.

Moscow was not worried about the remote possibility of military defeat by Afghan units, since the resistance was not well equipped neither large, despite the presence of some infiltrated Pakistani mujahidin. In the previous July 1979, the US National Security Advisor under Carter's Presidency, Zbigniew Brezinski, had advised the President to authorise a veiled support to the Afghan resistance, in the event that USSR would attack the country. The aid, however, was no military and on small-scale, since the United States were not much interested in reverting Amin's regime.¹³⁸ Soviet considerations concerning the invasion presented no international barriers, since the American Congress blocked the making effective of SALT II and NATO was in the process of counter-disposing Tomahawk and Pershing II missiles at the British base, as a response to the stationing of Soviet SS20 rockets in Eastern Europe.¹³⁹ Brezhnev declared that the détente was already extinct in several points and turned it in his favour, finding a guile to purge himself of its death. The United States could not impose any sanction against the Soviet Union in case of invasion; furthermore, they were distracted by the Iranian hostage crisis¹⁴⁰ and discouraged by the Vietnam War, therefore they did not represent a hindrance. On the contrary, in the Third World, the USSR achieved important accomplishments, mainly in Africa, and this constituted a fundamental encouragement for taking action in Afghanistan.

The final verdict was given by the group of four staunch Marxist-Leninist followers, that is Brezhnev, for personal reputation and prestige, Andropov, Gromyko and Ustinov; the rest of the Politburo agreed for moral circumstances of submission and the other organs of the Soviet apparatus were not convened nor interpellated. Dissidents were supervised by the KGB and duly exiled. The costs in human lives and financial expenditure were not examined, being judged superfluous. Public opinion was not taken into account, since it could be easily manipulated and kept out of the reality,¹⁴¹ influencing and controlling the mass media, as it would be deeply analysed in the third chapter of this thesis.

The initial designed scheme did not implicate a firefight between the Soviet army and the Afghan one. Conversely, subsequently to the conquering of strategic points in Kabul, the Soviet armed force would grant logistic assistance to the Afghan military units. The scope was to persuade them to cooperate in the armed struggle against the regime and the Afghan people too, chiefly being Islamic adherents.

¹³⁸ "Brezinski Interview," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15-21 January 1998, 76.

¹³⁹ Odd Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A': New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9 (Winter 1996-1997): 4.

¹⁴⁰ The Iran hostage crisis lasted from 1979 to 1981 and consisted of the sequestration of 66 American citizens at the US embassy in Teheran. 52 of them were held hostage for about a year. The time period coincided with the Iranian Islamic Revolution started in 1978 and injured US-Iran bilateral relations for a long time. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Iran hostage crisis" (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis>.

¹⁴¹ Ewans, *Conflict in Afghanistan: Studies in asymmetric warfare*, 100-101.

On December 13, 1979, the KGB devised a plan to poison Amin, his nephew Asadullah Amin, who coordinated the Afghan counterintelligence, and Mohammed Yaqub, the chief of the General Staff. Communications concerning the key men were operated by a group of Soviet paratroops and by the Muslim Battalion, that is the 154th Separate Spetsnaz Soviet Battalion, dubbed Muslim because of its composition of soldiers similar to Afghans, coming from the southern USSR republics.

Amin's cook, Michail Telebov, poured the KGB's poison into the President's favourite beverage, Coca-Cola, but had no effect. His nephew, on the other hand, got gravely ill the following day, but survived after his movement to Moscow in order to be nursed. The rapid accompanying of Asadullah Amin to Soviet Union was the umpteenth double-dealer demonstration to Amin's DRA of Soviet backup to Afghanistan. Within the Soviet motherland, public opinion was aware of Amin's crimes and awfulness of the regime; in Afghanistan, the person concerned had confidence in USSR good faith and support.

The procedure that the KGB brewed and that had to be accomplished consisted of the parallel killing of Amin that would be briskly substituted by Babrak Karmal, who was about to land at Bagram, a 60-km-far town from Kabul. The surprising *coup de main* turned into a fiasco, since he survived, and Ustinov opted for adopting a different approach.

In the meanwhile, the military district of Soviet Turkmenistan had been cautioned to be ready for a combat.¹⁴² The setting up of an expeditionary institution of armed forces accelerated and was transformed into the priority, in anticipation of a straight fight.

A direct and individual deed would be too exposed to the resistance of the Afghan army, that could rebel and resist; the most secure option would be the scheduling of a full-scale invasion onto the Afghan territory. An extensive occupation, in addition, would prevent Pakistani and Iranian intrusion.

In the meanwhile, Amin still relied on USSR protection and was advised to hide in the palace of Taj-Bek, in the suburbs of the capital, in order to be less exposed to citizens' view and to be more easily secured. He did not believe that the Soviet fellows would defeat his regime by force; the Soviets¹⁴³, in fact, did not directly demonstrate of being displeased by Amin.

On December 24, Soviet troops from the 40th Army, the 105th Guards of the Air Army Division (AAD) and from the 360th Guards of the Motorised Rifle Division (MRD) started to arrive in Kabul.

By December 27, more than 5,000 troops were garrisoned in the capital city.

¹⁴² Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, 58-60.

¹⁴³ Mohammed Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 19.

2.2.1 “Operation Štorm-333”: a KGB-coordinated affair

On December 27, 1979, the “Operation Štorm-333”, systematised by the KGB, took place.

The role of the KGB in Afghanistan had been central since the naissance of the DRA and until the end of the Soviet-Afghan War. It was organised within two principal sections, the Residency, working from the site of the Soviet embassy in Kabul, and the Representatives, who were officers of the KGB, sent to collaborate with the Afghan regime in a broad range. In addition, hundreds of KGB secret agents were on the territory under assumed names and remained unknown even by the governing body.

The Soviet Committee for State Security was divided in units, each of which cooperated in a determined area. “Pendant” and “Omega” were two specialised sections, present during the Afghan invasion and deployed immediately after the murder; “Alpha”, “Cascaď”, “Grom” and “Zenith” handled missions concerning assassinations, infiltration and sabotage.¹⁴⁴

The KGB succeeded in penetrating within mujahidin leagues, inside their bases and boot camps. Its office there became preponderant since the winter of 1978, when special cells actively operated to foil increasing Islamic opponents.

The *Komitet gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti* demonstrated ambiguity in its behavior. While the Soviet Union struggled to keep solid the PDPA, the KGB induced it to separate, applying to sharpen the lack of confidence between Soviets and Afghans. The same KGB agents were responsible for the diffusion of the thought that Amin was tending towards the United States. As a last resort, they managed to convince the public opinion that the option of an Afghan invasion was the best decision that could be taken.¹⁴⁵ To convince the masses, they exploited the fact that they were on the ground and were aware of every detail on how the DRA regime was acting and managing the surroundings.

During the various phases of the fight against President Amin, it can be said, that both the KGB agents and officers held an active primary function: in September 1979, with the “Operation Raduga”, to illegally and secretly take three Afghan cabinet ministers and bring them to the Soviet Union; in November, with the “Operation Agat”, to substitute the soldiers of the “Zenith” division with trained border guards, who were specifically drilled for the accomplishment of the close “Operation Štorm-333” within the walls of the palace of Taj-Bek.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ralph Pickard, “The KGB in Afghanistan,” *JOMSA* 65, no. 6 (November-December 2014): 5-7.

¹⁴⁵ Vasilij Mitrokhin, “По Следам Скверны – Афганистан, 1987 год” (“Po Sledam Skverny – Afganistan, 1987 god”), *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars* (July 2002): 49-51.

¹⁴⁶ Sharon Coleman Jones, “The KGB in Afghanistan: Defector’s Documents Shed New Light on Soviet War,” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, February 25, 2002.

The last-named operation concerned the killing of the President Hafizullah Amin, shut in his residential palace. In spite of his belief to be hidden and safe, waiting to be rescued by Soviet armed troops, the reality materialised in the storming of the building by the USSR military units themselves. They managed to kill about 150 presidential personal guards.¹⁴⁷ The operation was only the first and initial phase of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, since it would give the input for a ten-year war that would conclude only in 1989.

The proceeding of the invasion was framed in two complementary actions, besides Štorm-333, the Kremlin authorised another operation, “Bayal-79”, to officialise the introduction of Soviet divisions within Afghanistan to oust the President. In a matter of hours, the KGB special agents, in collaboration with the *Glavnoe Razvedyvatel’noe Upravlenie* (GRU), that is the USSR secret police, with border guards and aviation military troops seized 17 Afghan governmental structures. Contemporaneously, within only 43 minutes the operation Štorm-333 in the presidential palace concluded successfully. 660 individuals were involved, 24 belonging to the “Grom”, a subunit of the Soviet Alpha Group, 30 from the “Zenith” unity, 87 paratroopers of the 9th company of the 345th Guards Airborne Regiment (PPD) and the remaining 520 coming from the 154th Muslim Battalion. The deputy head of the coordination was the Colonel Oleg Shvets on the front lines of the Special Forces of GRU of the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁸ The development scheme for the capturing of the President was assigned to the Colonel of the GRU, Vasilyi Kolesnikov that worked in close collaboration with the chief of the Directorate “S” of the KGB, Yuri Drozdov.

As already mentioned, the Muslim Battalion was made up by Uzbeks, Turkmen and Tajiks, and had been previously trained in the Soviet Union, upon request of Amin himself. Physically more similar to native Afghans and dressed up as the Afghan troops, they held a fundamental role in letting enter Soviet troops inside the Taj-Bek palace.

At half past six in the evening of Thursday, December 27, the central sector of general communication systems of Kabul was hit by an explosion. The Soviet Minister of Communications had arrived in Afghanistan three days before, with a concealed objective. The DRA supposed that he went there to provide technical assistance, but his aim was to stop the functioning of the systemic centre to paralyse and bar the contacts within the city, once the Soviets had begun the invasive attack. At twenty past seven, the missiles were launched to mark the beginning of the incursion. It was handled almost exclusively on the ground.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Martin McCauley, *Russia, America and the Cold War: 1949-1991* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2008), 142.

¹⁴⁸ Udmancev Vadim, “Боевое крещение мусульман” (“Боевое kreshenie musul’man”), *Военно-Промышленный Курьер ВПК* (*Voенno-Promyshlennyj Kur’er VPK*) 48, no. 761 (December 2004), <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/425>.

¹⁴⁹ The invasion should have started two hours later, at half past nine, but it had to be anticipated. The head of the National Guard, Major Jandad, was invited by Soviet advisers to a birthday party, which scope was, in reality, a bloodless capture of the leaders of the Afghan brigade. Janded accepted the invitation but said that he would join the Soviets advisers and Afghan officers in the evening, after having got through his offices. Jandad started conducting a reconnaissance of Soviet positions, so, for security issue the Soviet consultants suggested to change the timing of

USSR soldiers pointed towards the nerve centres of the capital, the television and radio stations, the armoured departments number four and fifteen in the area of Pul-e-Chakhi, the police of the Ministry of Interior, the Qargha and Rishkor Divisions.

Many members of the Afghan airbase have been convinced by Soviet advisers to go on vacation and replaced by USSR professionals. The support to the invading troops was granted by former influent comrades of Amin's Khalq faction. They succeeded in impacting on the Afghan army and persuaded a portion to pounce on Amin, who, in September 1979, after a break in the leadership, banished them. The Soviet embassy ensured them a shelter, being conscious that they could be helpful in the future. In this regard, Sayyed Mohammad Gulabzoy and Asadullah Sarwari, two ex-leading Khalqi PDPA associates, escorted the Soviet invaders in Taj-Bek. They were halted by the defensive presidential sentinels.¹⁵⁰

Amin did not realise that the attack was led by the Soviets and persisted in believing that USSR was still his ally. He was not directly killed, rather captured alive. His death was due to the interruption of necessary medications after the poisoning, causing him seizures.¹⁵¹

The removal of Amin was the necessary condition to create favourable circumstances for USSR intercession. During the night of the assault, the KGB sorted out the securing of the Afghan Ministers of Defence and Internal Affairs, as the communication hearts and the headquarters of the intelligence.

Losses among Soviet lines were considerable, 44 men died in action, 44 in accidents and 74 were wounded but, despite the deaths, Amin's loyalists and himself were neutralised.

The confrontation between Amin's guards and Soviet troops was intense and extended, until the Afghans were defeated. None among the eighteen presidential sentinels survived.

KGB and GRU faced diverse difficulties during the preparation and implementation of the operation. The Afghan question did not only concern the regime, but, internally, mujahidin insurgences kept on developing. The combat was not limited to military actions, but had to be battled within the political, tactical and operational fields. Huge amounts of money were spent to set up a local communist intelligence service, the KhAD, famous for its instruments of torture.

The KhAD, acronym for the Department of State Information Services, operated as an independent ministry, notwithstanding being part of the Prime Minister's office. Their agents were trained in

the initiation of the Štorm-333 operation. See: Udmancev Vadim, "Боевое крещение мусульман" ("Боевое крешение musul'man"), *Военно-Промышленный Курьер ВПК (Военно-Промышленный Кур'ер ВПК)* 48, no. 761 (December 2004), <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/425>.

¹⁵⁰ Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982*, 17.

¹⁵¹ Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 96-98.

the KGB camps in Uzbekistan, at Balashikha, and took a key part in the consolidation of the renewed Afghan democracy under Karmal. KhAD decisively participate within state politics.¹⁵²

The first step to reorganise the administration in Afghanistan, through the mediation of the Soviet Union, however, was completed and accomplished between December 27 and 28. During the night, under the protective assistance of the KGB, Babrak Karmal arrived in Kabul. He was declared as the fulfilment of “the second stage of the Revolution”, as Andropov spoke at the telephone with him, just before the combat was over. Some days later, on January 1, 1980, he received the congratulations, through a telegram, by Brezhnev himself, for the election to the highest state office.

Karmal was officially nominated chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.¹⁵³

2.3 The Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989)

The citizens of Kabul did not comprehend what was happening at night of December 27, since in the capital city very often there were shootings and loud noises.

The following morning, they found a new government.¹⁵⁴

Hiding Soviet moves and managing them secretly was part of the strategy. Local population should not be conscious of what was going on and had to stay out of the sequence of events. Facing a new status quo, without monitoring how and when it was achieved was easier to accept. USSR should not be recognised as the executor of the operations, but only as an advocate of the larger population’s willingness. The lowest was the direct intromission in domestic affairs, the highest were the seconded results that Soviet Union could achieve. Afghan shared opinion should rest on the absence of a forced USSR intrusion and rather on a friendly gesture of support to ease the accomplishment of a recognised and pro-people regime.

After having overthrown the government, the Soviet forces reinforced the armed security in Kabul and in other central nucleuses. By December 28, the regiments of a Soviet Motorised Rifle Division moved toward western Afghanistan, gaining the control over the cities of Shindand, Herat and Kandahar.

Before the end of January 1980, the military division of the 40th Soviet Army was garrisoned in the Afghan territory. It was composed of an air assault squadron, an airborne section and two motorised rifle brigades. In total there were about 52,000 soldiers to keep safety. Their office was

¹⁵² Egor Evsikov, “Soviet Intelligence in Afghanistan: The Only Efficient Tool of the Politburo,” *Baltic Security & Defence Review* 11 (2009): 47-49.

¹⁵³ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989*, 103-104.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

not to fight, but to make act of presence in order to hold off the mujahidin. In this sense, the military prop to Karmal was more abstract and emotional than physical.

The new General Secretary of the PDPA and DRA's Prime Minister, as first move, after his appointment, released 15,000 political prisoners and deserters. Internal situation, however, did not normalise, since the majority of the population did not positively welcome the presence of foreign troops. It was seen as an occupation rather than a support. Babrak Karmal was judged of being a puppet of the USSR and did not gain the esteem of the people.

The armed movement of civilians against the Soviet aggressors awakened and diffused in the whole Afghanistan.¹⁵⁵

The Soviet-Afghan relations soon transformed into a combat for ideological supremacy; Islamic civilian nationalist forces opposed to state communist ones. The expected effect of pacification and social amelioration after the removal of Amin was not achieved, on the contrary, the scenario got worse and the adhesion to socialism and Soviet Union itself drastically decreased.¹⁵⁶

After the initial entrance of Soviets within Afghan country, the immediate outcomes that followed were the installation of security headquarters, the emplacement of armaments and military stationing. No direct gunfire was pursued by Soviet troops, but at times they were forced to fire back since the opposition corps opened fire, killing and wounding USSR servicemen. The first phase of what would transform into a draining war from the Soviet side was a defensive resistance. The scope of Soviet units was to rapidly stabilise the internal conditions of Afghanistan, by guarding the main passages of the country, the major towns, airports and tactical spots and to supply gunnery and munitions to the Afghan army, so to persuade them to fight the Islamic opponents and to defend the regime. Connections between Soviet forces and local dissidents had to be minimised. The aim of USSR was, sure enough, to withdraw its troops once the Afghan state legions would have accepted of combatting such internal battle.

The truth of the matter was that the army of Afghanistan turned out of being unable to autonomously manage the situation and, as a consequence, the 40th Army had to widen its influence and position.¹⁵⁷

The fact was that neither the Afghan state army supported Karmal's regime and accused the USSR of being an intruder; the distrust was reciprocal. Karmal, fearing that the Afghan soldiers would openly line up against his figure and side with the mujahidin, expressly asked to the Soviet troops of initiating a quick and dynamic battle. Military operations against the rebels started. The hope

¹⁵⁵ Michael A. Gress and Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 17-18.

¹⁵⁶ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 118.

¹⁵⁷ Charles E. Dudik, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower's Inability to Deny Insurgent Sanctuary," *United States Marine Corps* (March 2009): 8.

lied in stance by the Afghan army, limiting the Soviet intervention to a mere assistance. It did not happen, and the Soviet forces were obliged to take charge. The mujahidin enemies did not try to avoid direct confrontation, but despite being a large number and to some extent capable and powerful, they were beaten in the combats in the cities of Baghlan, Jalalabad, Taleqan, Takhar and Faizabad. The Afghan mujahidin realised their military inferiority and weaker capacity. Therefore, the leadership opted for splitting the divisions within groups of men between 20 and 100 individuals, transforming a large-scale fight into detached guerrillas. The structural organisation of the troops followed a decentralised scheme, it means that techniques and means differed among areas of the country. They made full use of their knowledge of the battlefields, pinpointed among Afghan mountains of the Hindu Kush and exploited them as a sort of weapon to cross the Soviets. Their base camps were hidden in unapproachable sites and, above all, they were temporary, just to supply the Islamic combatants. The taken approach covered sneak attacks, laying mines on the pathways.¹⁵⁸

The grounds that stimulated them to take this battle on were intrinsic within their religious roots and were not motivated by a desire of imposing a new government or ideological belief. If for the local inhabitants the war against invaders was justified by the defending of entrenched traditions and cultural habits, the Soviet Union tried to sell itself as a victim of Islamic offensive counterattacks, judged illegitimate since they were even addressed against the official and legitimised communist regime.

On the other hand, the Soviet commanders had to revise their tactics and strategies to adapt them to sub-groups of mujahidin that, consequently, were even more numerous in numbers. The Soviets were incompetent and unready to face such a challenge and became less efficient and more vulnerable to enemies. Furthermore, bad living conditions escalated the already precarious status. The Politburo decreed to resettle the 40th Army, instituting the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces (LCOSF) increasing from 90,000 up to 120,000 members through the years of the war. The composition was shifted within three independent regimens, five distinct brigades and several sub-units, besides the backup assured by the KGB and the GRU.

The lacking in preparation of military quarters for the LCOSF and the paucity of information about the geography of the land, coupled with the explosive set by mujahidin, caused huge deaths of Soviet soldiers. Therefore, the first stage of the Soviet-Afghan War was a collapse for the first and a victory for the latter.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Paul C. Teachey, "The Genesis of the Soviet Union's Failure during the Soviet-Afghan War: How the Geography of Afghanistan Impacted on Soviet Operations in the 1980s," *United States Marine Corps* (March 2010): 5-6.

¹⁵⁹ Gress and Grau, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, 19-20.

In March 1980 the second phase of the Soviet-Afghan War started. It would last until April 1985 and the main feature were the fighting on a wider scale and the occasional collaboration of Soviet troops with the Afghan regiments and units. The Soviet 40th Army was enlarged up to 81,000 members. The opposite faction, on the contrary, after having endured several losses, chose to pull out its divisions among the mountains to combat from a more hidden region, avoiding direct confrontations with huge Soviet forces. The mujahidin preferred to employ surprise attacks, detaining smaller battalions and carried out straight fight only in order to defend their military bases that, being situated in locations difficult to be reached, were immune from Soviet air strikes. In the specific case of Afghanistan, the Soviet operation did not consist of a mere deployment of military forces. The term had a more extensive meaning, embracing the ensemble of tactical moves, calculated changes of course and the ratio between operational actions and their public report. USSR leadership realised that the armed counter-opposition was not played on the battlefield, but through political propagandistic means, in order to convince the Afghan population to fight against the foreign Soviet enemy. USSR acted in the same way, trying to persuade the people that their operation was in the name of the defence of the rightful regime against Islamic dissidents. It was more a thoughtful campaign than a trial of military strength. The Soviet army commander, in fact, had to reshape the martial conduct organising the Army into sub-units. Their heavy equipment revealed to be inadequate on mountainous soils and, so, the Soviet pre-conviction of being able to totally defeat mujahidin in a short period of time vanished. The further weakening and drop of the Soviet Army came from political reasons. Karmal, after having released Amin's political inmates, established a new policy, founded again on corruption. Discontent in the villages arose and the Afghan army, because of national instability, was not in a position of running the situation. Soviet troops suffered from a greater diminution of Afghan military support in what had become an actual civil war. The Soviet-Afghan units were constituted about by 400,000 men and had the control over the cities and main roads; the Afghan mujahidin were 150,000 and supervised the rural areas.

By the end of 1984, Islamic regiments were built up and were equipped with mortars and mountain artillery. Their tactics were addressed to offensives along the borders of the regions where they hid their camp bases. In case of danger, the mujahidin, being aware of their condition of inferiority compared to Soviet army, merged into local population, making almost impossible their recognition. The advantage of having the people on their side was very useful to baffle USSR army.¹⁶⁰ There was even a strong presence of terroristic cells, that managed a clandestine network of enrolled mujahidin mainly active in the cities. Their activities even lied in sabotaging the DRA political apparatus, planting bombs and animating mass confusion. Afghan local intelligence and

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

secret services strained to penetrate within the government to undermine it from the inside. In the meanwhile, Soviet commander, conscious that the combat on large scale was risky and fruitless, concentrated the most of efforts to maintain strategic zones with the objective of persuading inhabitants to sustain the government by providing them food and primary goods. The results were not as positive as expected, since exerting political influence over Afghan people was very complex and distrust towards foreign USSR was not helpful.

The third phase lasted one year, from April 1985 to 1986. It was signed by the first open going on air about the war in Afghanistan that was, however, defined as a small conflict imposed on the state by a reduced number of national old politicians contrary to the communist regime. Soviet leadership had radically changed. The new General Secretary of the CPSU from March 1985 was Mikhail Gorbachev, who, by implementing his policy of *glasnost*¹⁶¹, decided to make Soviet semi-aware of what was going on overseas. The Soviet units withdrew several forces from direct fight to narrow the guarded boundaries and to reduce the profusion of combats. Parallel, the Afghan regime began to organise meetings with local tribes and their leaders to achieve reciprocal agreements that would largely diminish anti-government actions. Karmal succeeded in reconciling with the Pushtuns along the border with Pakistan. DRA strengthened its armed units, purging deserters and establishing a higher military discipline based on a complete freedom of religion. The Mujahidin opposition was in favour of a more collaborative relation with the government, mainly because peaceful surroundings would be exploitable to widen political support among the peasants. The fundamentalist units did not aim at ending the combats; they took up position in the provinces of Paktia, Kandahar and Logar and kept fighting against Soviet 40th Army that in May 1986 directed a series of operations against them. Such operations should have been mainly conducted by the DRA Army that proved not to be ready. Therefore, the Soviet Union, in order not to show its complete involvement and DRA marginality, covered its shortages and let it act autonomously in secondary actions.

The fourth and last stage of the Soviet-Afghan War started in December 1986 and lasted until the total withdrawal of the Soviet troops. USSR, in conjunction with DRA handled the so-called Operation Magistral against Islamic rebels in 1987. Five divisions *en masse* devastated the mujahidin in the province of Paktia with the purpose of taking the control over the road joining the city of Khost and Gardez. It would be arranged for the withdrawal of USSR Army from Afghanistan, divulged by Gorbachev.

¹⁶¹ In Russian it means “openness” and refers to a Soviet policy implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev that consisted of a more open discussion about social and political matters. It included the possibility of criticising the government and its conducts by officials and a more liberal diffusion of news by the mass media. See: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Glasnost” (Edinburgh: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2016), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/glasnost>.

He announced the “De-Brezhneviatation” in Afghanistan stating a unilateral proposal of pulling out Soviet forces. USSR foreign policy followed a new path in the name of a limitation in its hegemonism. Being radically opposite to the Islamic hegemonic ambitions, its position within Afghanistan would lose consensus and, furthermore, it was a persistent draining of national economic funds. The most sensible solution seemed to be the abandonment of the Afghan cause, reaching an arrangement with the DRA.

The PDPA CC called for an emergency meeting to decide upon the national reconciliation, interrupting the employment of military weapons. The first stage to achieve the project had to be the beginning of the removal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, which depended upon the suspension of foreign aid, especially from Pakistan, to mujahidin combatants. DRA firmly rejected the prosecution of internal civil war. On February 8, 1988, the General Secretary Gorbachev issued a statement officially announcing that a date for the initiation of the liberation of the Afghan soil from Soviet military units had been set by May 15, 1988. It would be completed within 10 months, by February 1989. Military garrisons in 13 of the 21 Afghan provinces had been already dismantled.¹⁶²

On April 14, 1988, in Geneva, the Resolution of the Political Situation around Afghanistan was signed. The signatories were the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, with the Soviet Union and the United States as guarantors. The Geneva Accords negotiated the conditions concerning the interruption of the Afghan War. It was mainly bilateral and concerned the base principles of Afghan-Pakistani relation in the respect of non-interference and non-intervention in mutual domestic affairs. It guaranteed international rights and made imperative the voluntary return of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. From the Soviet-American side, the agreement revived the disputes. The United States affirmed that their providing of weapons to the mujahidin would stop once the Soviet withdrawal had been definitively accomplished.¹⁶³

The mujahidin forces were not consulted in this respect and, for revenge, continued ambushing Soviet soldiers, persevering in the civil war until 1989.

Gorbachev did not sell the withdrawal from Afghanistan as a defeat. He assured his people that the Afghan national reconciliation and the reaching of a peaceful collaboration between PDPA and mujahidin was an issue purely concerning Afghanistan and its government. It had not to be elevated as an international question but remaining at the grade of internal one. The Soviet Union itself, as the United States and Pakistan, had to abstain from interference within Afghan affairs.

¹⁶² G. P. D. "De-Brezhnevisation in Afghanistan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 9 (1988): 398-399, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/437815>.

¹⁶³ Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*. (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), 737.

The Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah,¹⁶⁴ looking for a common ground with Islamic extremists had not to be treated as a betrayer of communist principles or of the DRA, since the way he decided to adopt to rule the country and the political rethinking he embraced were not a Soviet interest. The crystallisation of nationalism and patriotic view were the direct outcomes of Najibullah's attitude of getting closer to his fellow citizens, despite different and opposite ideological backgrounds. An eventual coalition within the government of DRA would be positively accepted by USSR, provided that PDPA would keep on leading the country and would not be excluded.

Therefore, the conclusion of the nine-year Soviet-Afghan War would not be told as a failure by the USSR General Secretary; quite the opposite, it would be reported as an incommensurable victory both at Soviet national and international level. It marked, in Soviet belief, the return to an independent still communist and democratic Afghan republic, finally able to self-manage its affairs.

Furthermore, the United States and Pakistan had to fulfil the signed obligations by discontinuing the support to mujahidin, renouncing to their imposition of authority over the territory.

Gorbachev's message would largely insist on the Afghan great success.

2.3.1 The “Cyclone Operation”: the US counteroffensive

Perceptions of the Soviet-Afghan War radically changed depending upon the side of action. The Soviet act of invasion, presented by USSR as an imperative deed to defend Afghanistan by the unlawful rebels against the official government, by the United States and Pakistan, was seen as a provocation and a gesture of complete breaking-off with the Western bloc.

Actually, the United States decided to aggressively reply to Soviet invasion in Afghanistan already in 1979. The initial intentions were to bother Soviet garrisons, without actuating bloody plans, but in two months the perception reverted, transforming into a more belligerent controversy.

The procedure consisted in supporting, both militarily and economically, the Islamic mujahidin to favour the Soviet defeat, but without directly interfering in the war.

The US President Jimmy Carter was the advocate of the secret scheme of providing aid to mujahidin units. He educated the Central Intelligence Agency, even know under the acronym of CIA, first-hand to deliver American weapons to Islamic combatants. He even proposed to build up a triangular alliance with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia called “freedom fighters” to better

¹⁶⁴ Mohammad Najibullah was the fourth and last communist President of the DRA. He replaced Karmal on September 30, 1987, after he decided to resign having lost Soviet trust, and remained in office until April 16, 1992. Previously Najibullah was the head of the KhAD and a member of the Parcham faction; in 1981 entered within the PDPA Politburo. See: Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institutions, 2014), 6-7.

coordinate armed actions against USSR and DRA armies. The strategy adopted by the United States relied on the employment of Pakistan as the station for the sorting of arms and as the central base for the mujahidin themselves, and as the centre to enrol and train Saudis, upholders of the Afghan Islamic enterprise. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, abbreviated to ISI, was the executive operator of the transfers of economic funds and weapons and were even the responsible of the incitement of the Arab States to back the American war against Soviets.¹⁶⁵

The whole programme remained secret and no official declarations or statements were made. The procedure, manoeuvring and goals were held in private diaries of Carter, in memoirs of his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brezinski, and of the director of the central intelligence, Stansfield Turner, at the beginning of the 1980s.¹⁶⁶ The Soviet act of war came as a surprise to the United States and was fully judged as a concrete act of aggression against them. According to Carter, it annihilated any possibility of reaching further agreements upon weapons control and paved the way to a more plausible nuclear war. On December 28, 1979 the National Security Council meeting was held at the White House in order to set the directions for the CIA counter-war in Afghanistan. Brezinski declared that, to weaken the Soviets, it was compulsory to supply a larger economic aid and a considerable provision of weapons to the Islamic rebels, avoiding a direct American involvement in the Afghan situation. The United States would render it a political issue, accusing Brezhnev of having definitively compromised the relations between the two superpowers. The consequence of Soviet action would be the imposition of economic sanctions and the restriction of trade transactions, the interruption of grain sales and of Soviet fishing rights. Such penalties were publicly announced by the President on January 4, 1980 on national television, accompanied by the promise of defending the Persian Gulf by any kind of aggression. At the end of the month, precisely on January 29, Carter gave the authorisation for a new operation of the CIA to sort lethal armaments to mujahidin through the government of Pakistan. The name in code of the operation was “Cyclone” and it would last until the dismantle of Soviet troops in Afghanistan in 1989. The amount of capital invested to sustain the Islamic rebels was of \$50 million per year.¹⁶⁷ The United States carefully and accurately chose the weapons with no evidence of the American provenience, as to keep unchanged the secrecy of the war and to deny any eventual accusation of participation. CIA, furthermore, tried to provide them with Soviet-originated weapons, so that, if mujahidin were found with those arms during the battles, it would seem they had simply stolen them. American prop to Islamic militant groups was possible only thanks to the

¹⁶⁵ Hasan-Askari Rizvi, “Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: An Overview 1974-2004,” *PILDAT* 11 (April 2004), 19-20. http://www.millat.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/democracy/1/Briefing_Paper_english_11.pdf.

¹⁶⁶ Riedel, *What We Won: America’s Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-1989*, 93.

¹⁶⁷ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996), 146.

intermediation of Pakistan under the martial law of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq that strongly supported the Afghan counteroffensive against the DRA and Soviet presence. The US idea was to create a sort of consortium to hide the direct link with Pakistan and to disperse the leak.

President Carter also claimed to boycott the Summer Olympic games in Moscow in 1980, to worldwide demonstrate the US condemnation of the Soviet invasion; Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, heavily seconded the American cause and in some declassified documents showed her backing to Carter.¹⁶⁸ Enmities against Soviet Union increased and the risk that Moscow could invade Pakistan became a forthcoming fear. Brezinski openly guaranteed in an interview that the United States would directly intervene to help Pakistani government in case of attack, primarily to reassure Zia and not to lose his alliance.

By 1980, the American relationship with Iran worsened, because of the hostage crisis and, contemporaneously, trying to exploit the position, the Soviet Union conducted a CPX, that is a military command post exercise, to plan an assault over the Iranian soil. It remained at level of exercitation on the base camps, but it extremely worried the United States that warned that each Soviet military action in Iran would have a consequence, leading to a direct confrontation between the superpowers.¹⁶⁹ Reciprocal distrust continued rising in the 1980s and Afghanistan kept being their battlefield. American measures were parallel to Soviet generalised behaviour. The role of CIA agents in this struggle was fundamental. During the 1980s they often flew to Afghanistan to meet with local spies or leaders, without a media entourage, since their meetings had to be maintained veiled. Their task increased in intensity especially after the appointment of the new US President, Ronald Reagan, on January 20, 1981. His political programme was mainly addressed to an upsurge of the fight against the Soviet Union and its global influence over the Third World. In this regard, his “Reagan Doctrine” was based on a three-dimensional assistance to support anti-communist guerrillas and rebel movements in an attempt to overthrow communist governments. Afghanistan was part of the anti-Soviet schedule.

The objective of the new President was to put an end to the USSR occupation, and, for this scope, a series of tactics, strategies and stratagems were implemented. The main intent was to raise the cost of the occupation, making it harder and more tiring for the Soviet Union, since, as Frank Anderson, the chief of the Near East Division of the CIA, declared, the hopes that the mujahidin would beat USSR 40th Army were vain. Stinger missiles started to be supplied to mujahidin in 1986, on a proposal of a senior official of the Pentagon, Michael Pillsbury. In September, a number of Islamic combatants was selected to be instructed to use the provided missiles in order to counter

¹⁶⁸ Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-1989*, 105-106.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 110-113.

air attacks by helicopters and jets of the Soviet division.¹⁷⁰ Mujahidin, that were suffering from huge casualties and losses, recovered the advantage in a brief time, forcing USSR pilots to bomb from a higher altitude, making the bombing less accurate and invasive. On the contrary, damages and harms against the Soviets increased because of the Stinger rockets.

1986 represented a turning year for the fate of the Soviet-Afghan War, since, shortly thereafter, the statement about the progressive withdrawal of Soviet troops was released. CIA did not rely on Soviet declaration upon the intention of retreating its troops; it was considered a “sham withdrawal”, orchestrated only to ceremonially give the appearance of the removal of infantry and tanks.¹⁷¹ The element that did not convince the Central Intelligence Agency about the truthfulness of Gorbachev’s public utterance was the constant procrastination of the decisive moment, whereas a retreat would not take so much time. The risk was the permanence on the territory of KGB infiltrated agents able to still exert influence over the Afghan government.

This can be regarded as the critical reason why the United States would continue supplying the mujahidin until the last USSR soldier had left Afghanistan in February 1989.

2.4 The failure of the Soviet strategy: reasons and mistakes

Despite Soviet reassurances, the Soviet-Afghan War ended with the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the motives that led to such a decision by Gorbachev were rooted in several points. It was the result of a sequence of facts and miscalculations that made unfeasible a prosecution of the fight against local mujahidin. The US-Pakistani-Saudi co-participation within what became a civil war marked its development and, perhaps, changed its upshot.

The Soviet Union was suffering from an oil shortage and had started importing it mainly from Saudi Arabia. USSR incapacity of self-sustaining would affect the trend of the war. In fact, being Saudi Arabia a follower of the American path would quadruplicate the prices for oil and the Soviet Union could not afford them. This represented the first sign of the downfall. The yearly economic losses amounted to \$20 billion and grievously damaged the USSR, that, having initially disregarded the rise of price, was forced to borrow money from abroad. By the second half of 1980s, the state debt reached an exponential peak.¹⁷² The immediate outcome was a cave-in of infrastructures and technological progress in weapons and tactics.

Corruption spread among the Eastern bloc, starting to distrust the Soviet Union. Czechoslovak communist bloc sold Soviet arms to the United States, allowing them to supply mujahidin. Sometimes they managed to directly buy weapons by Soviet servicemen, because even the army

¹⁷⁰ Philip Heymann, *Living the Policy Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21.

¹⁷¹ Christina Dameyer, “The Myth of a Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Middle East Insight CIA-RDP05S00365R000300140002-6* (January-February 1988): 34-41.

¹⁷² Yegor Gaidar, “The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil.” 19 April 2007, <http://www.aei.org/issue/25991>.

itself was highly corrupted. The whole Soviet apparatus was about to fall down, and the subsequent disorganisation revealed to be fatal in wartime.

Soviet lack of providing information about Afghanistan caused a social arrest. Soviet soldiers were not conscious of which war they were fighting and the real motives that pushed USSR to interfere within Afghan internal guerrillas. The assistance of a fraternal country and the performing of an international duty were the basilar explications given to servicemen that did not feel involved in the cause, differently from the mujahidin. Consensus did not subsist.

Soviet wrong perception of mujahidin's strength was another major mistake of evaluation. USSR leadership was convinced of the brief length of the war, since Islamic combatants were considered a limited group of rebels without methodology nor equipment. According to Soviet view, within a year, the insurgents would be defeated. But the war would last more than nine draining years. The effects of American intervention to support mujahidin and their increasing military strength was not sustainable anymore and led the Soviet Union to withdraw.¹⁷³

A further lethal error of judgement was made by the Soviet High Command and the USSR government itself that failed in assessing Afghanistan before invading it. They omitted that Afghan people judged any foreigner bringing inside the country some weapons as an occupier to be put down, independently from his goals. Furthermore, as afore mentioned, the Soviet army was composed by a large Muslim Battalion. The reason was even that the USSR Command believed that the presence of physically and ethnically similar soldiers to local inhabitants could exhort a better acceptance by the latter towards the foreign combatants. The outcome was the opposite. The Pushtun tribes, that were even the most contrary to the communist regime, had ever been arch-enemies with Central Asian dwellers.¹⁷⁴

Offensive firepower strategies were employed rather than tactical schemes, like air bombings, chemical weapons and nerve gases, but they did not meet the expected target since Soviet weapons were not apt for mountainous regions with reduced freedom of movement. Ground forces were limited and not sufficiently trained; furthermore, many of them even sympathised with the mujahidin's ideal. Mass dissertations within the Soviet and DRA Army and clandestine collaborationism with the Islamic rebels became more frequent. As a result, the ongoing break-up of the troops conducted to armed conflicts between the two allied armies that, besides striving against the rebels, began fighting against each other.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Robert D. Billard Jr., "Operation Cyclone: How the United States Defeated the Soviet Union," *Undergraduate Research Journal at UCCS* 3.2 (October 2010): 25-41.

¹⁷⁴ Gress and Grau, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, 24.

¹⁷⁵ Maj David S. Luckey, "The Soviet Failure in Afghanistan," *Marine Corps Association & Foundation* 86, no. 7 (July 2002): 1-5, <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/soviet-failure-afghanistan>.

What was imagined by Soviet Union as a victorious blitzkrieg transformed into a war of attrition that involved more countries than the planned ones and that represented the first significant inevitable withdrawal.

2.5 Conclusion

The Soviet-Afghan War was a fundamental passage for the Soviet Union. It represented the apex and the lowest peak of bilateral relations with Afghanistan and, above all, the detachment of the communist DRA from Soviet communism.

It was the net demonstration that foreign impositions could not be durable, in spite of the Soviet efforts of disguising difficulties and showing a veiled reality. The USSR did not consider the close participation of the United States that, exploiting the offensive as a sign of Soviet disavowing towards détente and the maintenance of an international peaceful status quo, immediately backed the Islamic rebels. The erroneous self-perception the Soviet Union detained of its authority and strength that, according to its view, had to be shared and respected, would be the main cause of the military failure during the decade 1979-1989.

The faulty interpretation USSR gave to the run of the war depended upon the calculations made by Soviet leadership that considered mujahidin not sufficiently trained to face an armed conflict against a technological and soldierly advanced superpower. The recklessness in deciding to invade in order to re-affirm a widespread ideological supremacy and ascendancy would convert into the testimony of the loss of influential hegemony. Eastern communist countries themselves would detach from the Soviet communist motivation for the Afghan occupation, betraying their same ideological guide. Arab states and Pakistan would ally with the United States, setting up an anti-communist league that would hit the Soviet Union from several sides, not only military but economic too.

The war in question was an ensemble of theoretical strategies and tangible actions. The fact that no Soviet individual was really conscious about the situation in Afghanistan, that no soldier was interested in the affair and the absence of a concrete explanation to the reasons why this invasion had to be supported by the people, in the long term, would become an element of internal split and, above all, of weakness. Until 1985, society was kept out from political issues. Only with the introduction by Gorbachev of the policy of transparency, it started to be informed. Information would continue being sifted and manoeuvred in fact. As mentioned, the withdrawal of the Soviet troops would be judged as a victory for the Soviet Union, but it would be celebrated as a success even by the American counterpart. Therefore, the way the outcome was analysed and perceived was definitively opposite. Political perception, or better, the approach that was chosen to spread political data and details was peculiar of each participant within the war and it was an actual

complementary strategy. A closer examination of this aspect would be approached in the following third chapter.

Chapter 3

Soviet Political Propaganda upon the Afghan Invasion

The military Soviet-Afghan conflict between 1979 and 1989, although it remained at local level, was one of the most ideologised armed disputes. It epitomised the apex of the exacerbation of the political and ideological confrontation between the two antagonistic Soviet and American world systems and assumed the trait of a war unfolding on manifold fronts. Besides being canonically fought militarily, the fight became an authentic battle of information, rendering propaganda and communication means concrete elements of the war strategy. The fields of action would embrace the military line, the economic, strategic, diplomatic and, especially, the mass communication spheres. Deliberative destructive influence, exerted by one of the counterparts, in this case by the Soviets, could contribute to the effectiveness of the military strategy, playing a part to undermine the authoritative strength of the enemy. USSR propagandistic apparatus strived to deepen internal contradictions in Afghan units that, being shifted between state army and mujahidin forces, were running organisational and tactical difficulties.

The importance of propaganda and of its use within such ideological struggle played a fundamental role to build the desired Soviet image, with the aim of getting higher theoretical and efficient ascendancy to achieve the prearranged purposes. The main target of the propaganda activities was the providing of a single and shared ideologic impact among the population. The reality showed that Soviet media, above all central newspapers, would not totally reflect the factual reality.

The most evident tendency was the hiding of military feats, replacing the report of dead, wounded soldiers, of the relentlessness of local Islamic rebels, and of part of the Afghan population itself, against the permanence of Soviet troops, with images of bucolic living together. The convincement of Soviet citizens would be made possible thanks to a strong censorship, obstructing any leak.

However, the Soviet communist machine of propaganda, in spite of having proved its efficacy and forcefulness within the Soviet Union and the USSR Army in the Afghan conflict, revealed not to be adequate and successful in affecting the worldwide public opinion. The analysis of the Soviet propaganda during the 1980s, its essence and goals would be the core research to determine the political perception over the Soviet-Afghan War and to draw the conclusions concerning the specificity of the fulfilled results in the propagandistic confrontation.

3.1 USSR domestic public awareness: the Soviet censorship between 1979 and 1985

The organisation of the Soviet information system, in 1979, was not sufficiently skilled to support the Soviet-Afghan War. The apparatus of the Soviet propaganda continued to operate in an

outdated way, arising again the ideas and plans employed during the Second World War. Soviet patriotism and nationalism, the fight against a common enemy and the defence at any cost of the *Rodina mat'*, the motherland, revealed not to be applicable and sensible for the invasion in Afghanistan, since the matter did not directly involve the Soviet Union, but it was a mere Afghan domestic affair. The USSR opted for intervening without being concretely menaced.

The main reason of inadequacy of the information management was the lack of awareness about the Islamic world and the Afghan social system by Soviet scientists and analysts; they often ran up against communication mistakes. The supportive network to be placed beside the Soviet Army in its armed face-off against mujahidin was not methodical, neither its working systems were in line with the Afghan issue, being oblivious and ignorant of the traditional and cultural surroundings.¹⁷⁶

The arranging for the implementation of the Soviet invasion was kept hidden until the decisive moment. The internal media within the Soviet Union continued to exhibit a peaceful and stable scene, without any hint to the imminent military undertaking in Afghanistan. The population was not conscious about the foreign policy matters, in order not to ruffle the public opinion. Popular agitation and raising of questions could spark off controversies and polemics that would not be functional to the blitzkrieg the Soviet Politburo had set to fight. The Central Committee of the USSR Politburo opted for covering up the international aid provided to Afghanistan; the media, in fact, did not mention the huge economic and financial support destined to the Third World's Islamic country.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, USSR financial system was not on the rise: economic stagnation and inadequate systems of transportation for consumer goods caused a reappearance of mass poverty. Therefore, the circulation of reporting around the funding destined to the Afghan DRA could originate popular agitations among a wretched population.

After the resolution of invading was taken and the military command was uttered by the Soviet leadership, at the end of December 1979, the newspaper *Pravda* denied the presence of the Soviet 40th Army over the Afghan soil, defining it as a mere invention. Rumours about an imminent garrison of troops in Afghanistan would be covered up until the fait accompli.

The strategy of the Soviet Union's propaganda within the motherland was radically addressed to the preservation of Soviet inhabitants of their confidence and ideological belief towards the USSR, without running into perplexities, especially during a time period dominated by economic slackening and by a consequent stepping back in ideological consensus towards the communist leadership. The state elemental concern was to demonstrate that internal affairs, regarding Soviet

¹⁷⁶ Sergej V. Fogel', "Особенности пропаганды СССР во время военной акции в Афганистане: 1979-1989 гг." ("Osobennosti propagandy SSSR vo vremja voennoj akzii v Afganistane: 1979-1989 gg."), *Psyfactor* (June 2009).

¹⁷⁷ Odd A. Vestad, "Накануне ввода советских войск в Афганистан," *Новая и новейшая история* ("Nakanune vvoda sovetskikh vojsk v Afganistan," *Novaya i novejšaya istoriya*), no. 2 (Spring 1994): 19-35.

population and domestic growth and development, were the absolute priority. These were the grounds for the withholding of information about Soviet foreign policy ambitions.

The initial phase of the Soviet-Afghan War, coinciding with the arrangement and implementation of the invasion by the Soviet army, was characterised by a decisive denial and media disapproval of the USSR initiative of interfering within domestic affairs of the Afghan foreign country. So, the first days of the military intervention did not exist in the eyes of Soviet public.

On December 27, 1979 the Politburo adopted a decision upon the role and path of the propaganda; it was a paper concerning a real schedule for the mass media. The document, referring to the Soviet-Afghan Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation, proclaimed the need of progressively spread the news about Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, introducing it as a response to a DRA request for aid. Soviet military cooperation would be presented as a limited contingent to morally second and assist the Afghan communist government in its campaign against the Islamic external aggressors. The threat to the gains of the communist revolution and the menace to the internal growth were two founding motives for reciprocal asking of armed intervention, following the aforementioned signed treaty. The paper of the 27 December exhorted the mass means of communication to lay on the written and countersigned explanatory motivations at the base of the Soviet entrance into Afghan boundaries, as to make the public opinion appreciate the Soviet attitude towards friendly Afghanistan.

3.1.1 From the denial to the admission of Soviet presence in Afghanistan

On December 29, 1979 in three central Soviet newspapers, *Pravda*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, and *Pravda Severa* the first official release talking about Afghanistan was published. It was the “Appeal of the Government of Afghanistan” asking for Soviet assistance to hinder the counter-revolutionary mainly Islamic movement.

In the publication of *Pravda* of December 28, moreover, there was an article titled “K sobytiyam v Afganistane”, that is “On the events in Afghanistan”, where the principal theme was the danger of an aggression by the United States. According to the Soviet newspaper, the US, for years, had been building their “strategic arcs” around the southern borders of the Soviet Union in order to launch a military offensive against the latter. The American springboard would be Afghanistan itself, lacking in Soviet military presence.¹⁷⁸ The excuse of the oncoming assault would justify a deeper concentration of armed Soviet troops in Afghanistan. So, the decision of the USSR to garrison the country was mandatory and totally necessary even to safeguard its national security from the American arch-enemy.

¹⁷⁸ Aleksandr Petrov, “К событиям в Афганистане” (“K sobytiyam v Afganistane”), *Pravda*, December 28, 1979.

Some days after the seizure, on January 13, 1980, *Pravda* published an interview with General Secretary Brezhnev and, for the first time, the Soviet foreign policy towards Afghanistan and its Democratic Republic was mentioned. First, the observation of the General Secretary was addressed to the clarification of why DRA had appealed to the USSR to receive assistance, adducing as an explanation the presence of external elements intentioned to undermine the authority of the legitimate power. Second, he referred to the obligations between Soviet Union and Afghanistan pursuant to the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation, that was the reason why USSR positively responded to the Afghan solicitation for help. Third, Brezhnev underlined the common intentions between the two communist governments, to calm down the mass consciousness about the risk of a serious menace to national security that would not occur. Lastly, he drew attention on Soviet moral values, especially solidarity and the bond of maintaining promises. The rhetoric of the communist leader was oriented at strengthening the optimistic and reassuring image of the *Rodina mat'*, reaffirming a strong collective perception of the ability, altruism and sturdiness of the whole Soviet Politburo. "Words do not disagree with deeds", this was the most persuasive sentence uttered by the General Secretary.

Brezhnev, in fact, besides confirming the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the participation of the USSR troops, insisted on explaining the founding motives at the base of such a decision.¹⁷⁹ The aim of the propagation of his words was the defence of the Afghan cause and the convincement concerning the necessity of the protective armed invective in favour of the DRA and against the Islamic rebels. The tide of the war was taken for granted and boasted about a net and rapid Soviet victory. The success of the war was largely promoted and praised by the mass communication media, paying attention not to nominate the military intervention as a war. The Soviet invasion was sold as an elevated example of international assistance to the friendly communist state of Afghanistan, almost bloodless and without deaths.

Since then, official pronouncements and censorship imposed the media to mention the Soviet-Afghan conflict as the "problem around Afghanistan", avoiding of clarifying that there was an ongoing large-scale contest. Any news regarding Afghanistan had to follow the guidelines sketched out during the interview with Leonid Brezhnev.

Therefore, the portrait of the war was fragmented and discrepant; the nature of official foreign policy statements, in fact, intrinsically contrasted the limitations imposed on the propagandistic machine in reporting the facts. The information approach was plainly planned. The propagandistic political communication embodied a vertical and unidirectional proceeding in which the topics

¹⁷⁹ Leonid I. Brezhnev, "Ответы Л. И. Брежнева на вопросы корреспондента газеты" ("Otvety L. I. Brezhneva na voprosy korrespondenta gazety"), *Pravda*, January 13, 1980: 1.

and articles allowed to be introduced to public consciousness were selected and designated exclusively by the summit authority of the USSR.

During the month of January, *Pravda*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Ogonyok* and *Pravda Severa* published several articles spreading propagandistic messages as a support to Soviet actions in Afghanistan, stressing the urgency with which the DRA government demanded political, moral, economic and military assistance.¹⁸⁰ The additional aim to be pursued, and that was often reasserted by the media, was the obstruction of the American plans that were interfering within Afghan domestic affairs to turn the country into an anti-Soviet and anti-communist region.¹⁸¹

In the release of *Ogonyok* of January 12, 1980 the editors released a publication concerning the effectiveness of the communist revolution realised by Afghan people in April 1978. It was enhanced and exalted as the first step to implement its precepts at ideological level. Hafizullah Amin and his dictatorship ended, under no declared circumstances, and the real revolution would doubtless triumph. Furthermore, there was the presence of a pressing implicit message inviting Soviet people to proudly celebrate the first anniversary of the friendly treaty with Afghanistan, honouring it by the fulfilment of the agreed undertakings. More in detail, it meant that the provision by the Soviet Union of material and immaterial reinforcement was a written duty, besides being a moral obligation.¹⁸²

The presented items were not commented neither supported by effective data. How many Soviet soldiers were sent to Afghanistan, the specific military operations they were organising, the local circumstances and geographical implications, the approximative number of Islamic enemies to be defeated would never be specified. Soviet readers would remain passively oblivious of the actual USSR participation within the Afghan question. The propagandistic Soviet rhetoric was studied to be directed towards the moulding of a symbolic conflict between the good and evil. The first was personified by the main stronghold of the globe, that is the Soviet Union itself with the Afghan revolutionaries supporting the DRA; the latter stereotyped the world gendarme, or rather the United States and their pupils, the counter-revolutionary mujahidin.

The Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Krasnaya Zvezda*, repeatedly, published articles concerning the success of Soviet co-participation in military strategies, stressing the failure of the mujahidin that were suffering of several casualties. Under Brezhnev, and so, during the first phases of the conflict, media line and its coverage were the projection of the General Secretary's policy and his broad explications to the invasion, justified by indefinite ideological wordings. As a consequence,

¹⁸⁰ Yuri P. Kornilov and Rashid M. Musin, "Юность верна революции" ("Yunost' verna revolyuzii"), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, January 3, 1980.

¹⁸¹ "О выступлении президента Дж. Картера по телевидению" ("O vystuplenii prezidenta J. Kartera po televideniyu"), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, January 6, 1980.

¹⁸² Vadim B. Kassis and K. Rashidov, "Торжество революции" ("Torzestvo revolyuzii"), *Ogonyok*, January 12, 1980.

the absence of plausible and true journalistic reports was the mirroring of the political approach. Soviet media did not hint at a valuation of the victims, neither at desertions among the soldiers, nor at the several complications the Soviet Army had to face, fighting in such a geographically hostile territory. Since the beginning of the war, in 1979, Soviet media almost disregarded the Afghan state of affairs and behaved more as delegates of foreign policy, instead of representatives of domestic information network.¹⁸³

The war in Afghanistan did not get much coverage; it was treated within the context of the Cold War. Such choice was not coincidental, but it was the result of detailed censors' cuts to introduce the information documentation concerning the Afghan War so as to depict it as an issue of internal affairs of Afghanistan, and not as a Soviet foreign policy matter. The articles regarding Afghanistan and the armed split were placed within the section of international news, in order to reaffirm the absence of a political connection with the Soviet Union. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported the news about the Afghan conflict under the indicatory headings of "Mir" ("World"), "Mir: chronica i problem" ("World: chronicles and problems"), "Mir vos'midecyatych" ("The world of the eighties"); *Pravda* under the section of "Mezhdunarodnaya informaziya" ("International information") and, similarly, *Ogonyok* dedicated a specific portion to the situation in Afghanistan within "Kolonka mezhdunarodnogo publizista" ("Column of the international journalist") and "SSHA: geografiya vmeshatel'stva" ("USA: the geography of the intervention"). The analysis of these captions is functional to materialise the picture of the war in Afghanistan the Soviet propaganda was intended to spread, making it publicly considered a question of secondary importance, not being directly linked to Soviet policy.

Until 1985, ideologically, the Soviet propagandistic media stressed the historical importance of the Soviet-Afghan connection, in view of which the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, implemented agrarian reforms. The internal PDPA split was not mentioned and neither domestic aversion of the mujahidin and their military display were showed. Propaganda focused on the image of Afghanistan as an allied strategic Soviet frontier, drawing parallelisms between the two socialist realities. Sporadic photographs, bound to journalistic articles, depicted Soviet soldiers planting trees, constructing hospitals, schools, houses, roads and remodelling mosques in Kabul. The Soviets were described as altruistic men performing their duties for the sake of the Afghan people, as in the magazine *Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya* of February 28, 1980 that extolled the merits of the young USSR soldiers teaming up with the local population.¹⁸⁴ *Literaturnaya Gazeta*

¹⁸³ John D.H. Downing, "Trouble in the backyard: Soviet media reporting on the Afghanistan conflict," *Journal of Communications* 8 (Spring 1988): 5-32.

¹⁸⁴ *Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya*, February 28, 1980.

of March 19, 1980, equally, emphasised the selflessness of the Soviet troops sent to Afghanistan, refraining from working in their military manoeuvres in situ.¹⁸⁵

Instead, at the political level, the Afghan resistance and the purely going into military action by Soviet forces were minimised, with the purpose of remarking the irregular backup provided to mujahidin by Pakistan and the United States. The aim was to accuse them of supplying weapons to feed internal guerrillas. In the number of February 5, 1980, *Pravda* published the words uttered by the chief of the International Department of the CC CPSU, Boris Ponomarev, through which he reassured people that the whole Afghan population held a friendly stance towards Soviet soldiers, denying any defection and clashes between USSR and the Afghan Army. Ponomarev insisted upon the excessive violence and hatred of the counterpart, that was not only constituted by mujahidin, but especially by Pakistanis and American imperialists.¹⁸⁶

During 1980 and 1981 the highest percentage of reports concerned the civil war in Afghanistan, granting a reduced portion of space to the armed and practical assistance guaranteed by the Soviet Union to the DRA troops. Soviet servicemen were presented as moral heroes and not war military protagonists - such role was assigned to the soldiers of the Afghan army, to the police, to internal military organisations and to the civilians contributing to fight the mujahidin. The focus of propaganda in favour of Afghan inhabitants was deeply aimed at proving the detachment between deadly military actions implemented by the DRA and the Soviet aid, provided by soldiers in situ, that was limited to a mere prop to the population and that acted as a deterrent. In an article of May 6, 1981, released by *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, whose title was “Komu vygodna eta lozh’?”, meaning “Who would benefit from this lie?”, the main theme was the negation of the rumours circulating around the active participation of Soviets in military offensives, resolutely confirming that the DRA and its state army initiated and carried on the war; the Soviet units were only a sort of sleeper reserve.¹⁸⁷

The aspired task by the Soviet Union through the central propaganda was to justify the multiple support granted to the DRA, rather than to defend it, persuading the masses of the goodwill of the Soviet leadership.

Approximatively 130 Soviet journalistic releases covered the situation in Afghanistan; none dealt with the contingent role of Soviet soldiers in the war. The headlines primarily spotlighted on the external aggression suffered by the DRA, on the financing of the war that entirely belonged to the DRA government itself, on the normalisation of the status quo thanks to the military ability of the Afghan army. Some apt examples of releases of *Ogonyok* concerning the armed struggle in

¹⁸⁵ *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, March 19, 1980.

¹⁸⁶ *Pravda*, February 5, 1980.

¹⁸⁷ R. Braun, “Кому выгодна эта ложь?” (“Komu vygodna eta lozh’?”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, May 6, 1981.

Afghanistan, are “Afganistan: narod na strazhe”, that is “Afghanistan: a country on guard”, on August 25, 1979;¹⁸⁸ “Afganistan v bor’be za nobuju zhizn’”, that is “Afghanistan fighting for a new life”, February 2, 1980;¹⁸⁹ “Afganistan: plamya bor’by, plamya svobody”, meaning “Afghanistan: the flames of the struggle, the flames of freedom”, April 26, 1980¹⁹⁰ and “Afganistan: put’ k progressu”, “Afghanistan: the path to progress”, August 9, 1980.¹⁹¹ The amount of publications inherent in the Afghan problem, during the initial phase of the war, between 1979 and 1981, was very large. Some of referential articles of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* were “Pul’s stolizy”, that translated means “The pulse of the capital”, of January 11, 1980;¹⁹² “Kabul segodnya”, “Kabul today”, on January 3, 1980¹⁹³ and “Korchaginzy Afganistana”, that was a kind of hymn to the best soldiers of Afghanistan, published on July 10, 1981.¹⁹⁴ Even *Pravda Severa*, throughout the year 1980, dedicated a lot of space to the evolution of the fight in Afghanistan, being cautious in keeping the Soviet 40th Army outside of the military operations. “Afganskaya revolyuziya na novom etape”, translated in “The Afghan revolution at a new stage”;¹⁹⁵ “Kto napravlyaet agressiyu protiv Afganistana”, “Who is directing the aggression against Afghanistan”;¹⁹⁶ “Vokrug sobytij v Afganistane”¹⁹⁷ and “V zashitu afganskoj revolyuzii”,¹⁹⁸ that, in order, reported the facts around the war victories achieved by the DRA and defended the communist revolution in Afghanistan, standing by the battle of the Afghan government against the counter-revolutionaries. “Undeclared war against Afghanistan”, as it was named in the publication of *Pravda* of February 5, 1980, whose original title was “Neobyavlenaya vojna protiv Afganistana”,¹⁹⁹ well summarises the impulse of media propaganda was to relieve of responsibilities the Soviet Union, laying the blame for the conflictual Afghan situation on the United States. Secretly ensuring their support to the mujahidin, they enabled the continuance of the war.

The just mentioned headlines are some fitting explicative instances of the coverage the Afghan war detained in the first two years. Since the Soviet invasion in December 1979 to 1981, the propagandistic apparatus of the USSR turned the political perception of the military face-off

¹⁸⁸ “Афганистан: народ на страже” (“Afganistan: narod na strazhe”), *Ogonyok*, August 25, 1979.

¹⁸⁹ “Афганистан в борьбе за новую жизнь” (“Afganistan v bor’be za nobuju zhizn’”), *Ogonyok*, February 2, 1980.

¹⁹⁰ “Афганистан: пламя борьбы, пламя свободы” (“Afganistan: plamya bor’by, plamya svobody”), *Ogonyok*, April 26, 1980.

¹⁹¹ “Афганистан: путь к прогрессу” (“Afganistan: put’ k progressu”), *Ogonyok*, August 9, 1980.

¹⁹² “Пульс столицы” (“Pul’s stolizy”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, January 11, 1980.

¹⁹³ “Кабул сегодня” (“Kabul segodnya”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, January 3, 1980.

¹⁹⁴ “Корчагинцы Афганистана” (“Korchaginzy Afganistana”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, July 10, 1981.

¹⁹⁵ “Афганская революция на новом этапе” (“Afganskaya revolyuziya na novom etape”), *Pravda Severa*, January 6, 1980.

¹⁹⁶ “Кто направляет агрессию против Афганистана” (“Kto napravlyaet agressiyu protiv Afganistana”), *Pravda Severa*, January 1, 1980.

¹⁹⁷ “Вокруг событий в Афганистане” (“Vokrug sobytij v Afganistane”), *Pravda Severa*, January 11, 1980.

¹⁹⁸ “В защиту афганской революции” (“V zashitu afganskoj revolyuzii”), *Pravda Severa*, January 16, 1980.

¹⁹⁹ “Необъявленная война против Афганистана” (“Neobyavlenaya vojna protiv Afganistana”), *Pravda*, February 5, 1980.

towards a plain foreign event, within which the Soviet Union was moderately involved in. It seemed that the extent of the war would implicate only the Afghan people, reducing the conflict to a civil war on a small scale. The propagandistic and information communication, addressed to the public opinion, betokened a juxtaposition between the participant subjects in the war, that would not be presented as “us”, the Soviets, and “them”, the Afghans, but as “they” and “the Afghans”, in order to implicitly reiterate the unilaterality of the war. Fitting with the official document regarding the circulation of news allowed by the censorship, the Soviet Union would not be portrayed as a main influential figure in Afghanistan, but rather as an extra element of any great importance.

3.1.2 A thematic propagandistic turnabout under Andropov

As the years passed and the conflict continued, the presentation of the occurrences changed in parallel. Around 1982, under the General Secretary of the CPSU, Yuri Andropov, and until his hospitalisation at the end of 1983, the Soviet media was granted a higher coverage to the several complications and obstacles the Soviet 40th Army was compelled to face in the conflict against Afghanistan.²⁰⁰ The troubles the Soviet troops were constrained to endure were examined and considered from the point of view of bad living conditions, always denying any military complication and implication. Such trend would suddenly be reversed parallel with Andropov’s disappearance from the public. Censorship would prevent again the diffusion of “bad news”. Soviet propaganda reported vague information around Afghanistan, and the most of which were anecdotes. The record on what was going on over there consisted of accounts of life in society of Soviet soldiers being integrated with the Afghan surroundings, of their altruistic propensity to support the locals in their everyday activities, protecting them from mujahidin’s offensives and deadly ambushes. The Soviet Union was depicted as the bastion that would bring back peace and prosperity to Afghanistan, in the name of a helpful and unselfish friendship, as evident in *Pravda* of April 27, 1982, within which the nucleus was the good and fruitful neighbourhood between USSR and Afghanistan, allowing to achieve positive and advantageous results in the ongoing war.²⁰¹

Around the years 1982-1983, the Soviet armed forces started to be depicted as humanitarian assistants, bringing economic and military aid to Afghanistan that was running into a crisis. The semantic description of Soviet soldiers started to be selected more accurately. It existed a net distinction between the terms “voin”, warrior, and OKSV, that was the Russian acronym for the

²⁰⁰ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, February 26, 1983.

²⁰¹ “Афганистан—СССР: плоды добрососедства” (“Afghanistan – USSR: plody dobrososelstva”), *Pravda*, April 27, 1982.

expression “limited contingent of Soviet troops”. The first was more orotund and celebrative, employed to celebrate the heroism of combatants defending their motherland, often accompanied by the attribute “internationalist”; the latter was more neutral and chosen to widely refer to the Soviet military support.²⁰² The denomination internationalist warrior was mainly used by the editors of *Ogonyok*, that was the most active in the exalting of Soviet forces’ engagement to meet the international duty with Afghanistan. The definitions of international duty and internationalist-warrior were given by the correspondent Boris Marbanov in the release of June 25, 1983. He cited “the memo of a Soviet internationalist-warrior” that was distributed to every single soldier arriving in Afghanistan from the USSR, declaring that the duty of everyone was to extend a helping hand to inhabitants of friendly Afghanistan, repelling the imperialistic aggression from outside. The task became international since the country to be assisted was foreign and forasmuch as the involved nations belonged to different continents. The article, titled “Shakaly v vol’chem logove”, meaning “Jackals in the wolf’s lair”, furthermore, was a confutation of circulating information about the death of a Soviet soldier, Sergej Afindulidi, and regarding its cause, that would be attributed to a firefight between the Soviets and the mujahidin.²⁰³ The paradox was that the truthfulness of the survival of Afindulidi was verified, but the non-fatal was transformed from a reciprocal fight into a unilateral and surprise offensive by the mujahidin against the Soviet troops during a peaceful passage of the military column. The report was lacking in details and reliable information, but, however, it explicitly talked about a direct contact between the two factions.

The peculiarity of the provided information to Soviet people was the lack of fired smashes in Afghanistan by the USSR Army. No deviation from the censured imposed version could be accepted.

On May 23, 1983, Vladimir Danchev, a Soviet radio newscaster, was dismissed from his office and locked up in a psychiatric hospital. He contradicted, during a public broadcast for Radio Moscow, the official Soviet ideology and propaganda, calling for a resistance by the Afghan people against the Soviet invasion. Until then, no communication means had employed the term *invasion*, in fact, according to the authorised and legitimised communist party line, Soviet Union was present in Afghanistan to defend its people from the Islamic transgressors and terrorists, and not to invade the country.²⁰⁴

Soviet press tended to underline the factional struggle within the mujahidin forces, taxing them with drug peddling, smuggling and illicit traffic of armaments, backed by Pakistan,²⁰⁵ working in

²⁰² Военный энциклопедический словарь. М.: Эксмо ВЭС (Voennyj ensiklopedicheskij slovar M.: Eksmo VES), 2007, 204.

²⁰³ Boris Marbanov, “Шакалы в волчьем логове” (“Shakaly v volchem logove”), *Ogonyok*, June 25, 1983.

²⁰⁴ “Afghan Blunder is Attributed to Radio Moscow Announcer,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1983.

²⁰⁵ *Pravda*, April 13, 1986, cited in CDSP, no. 38:15.

collaboration with the American CIA, that, despite being conscious of the Afghan scenario, remained uninterested.²⁰⁶ On the contrary, the United States themselves, fuelled the supply of bombs and guns. Pakistan's discrediting became a central theme in Soviet propaganda, since between the Afghans and Pakistanis living on the Afghan soil there were frictions and miscomprehensions, leading to direct faces-off. The unpopular and unshared temperament of Pakistan was repeatedly stressed,²⁰⁷ both to convince Soviet citizens about the positive reputation of the USSR in Kabul and to shift the focus of the ongoing military garrisoning from the Soviet field of action to foreign ones. Moving the focal point allowed Soviet leadership to evade further explications on the concrete facts, directly involving the 40th Army. Whereas Soviet central propaganda was more centred on the discrediting of mujahidin's Pakistani ally, Soviet Central Asian press directed its strains to belittle the Afghan mujahidin themselves, precisely pinpointing their atrocities and human outrages. The newspaper *Turkmenskaya Iskra* of March 11, 1980 deeply reported the wickedness of the mujahidin, burning, without any remorse, trees and crops, devastating schools and medical institutions and placing mines on the roads camouflaged in toys²⁰⁸ to prompt children to pick up them. The Uzbek *Pravda Vostoka*, on June 17, 1985, published an article, titled "Mesto Sluzhby – Afganistan", in which mujahidin were taxed with ruthlessness leading to public assassinations of civilians after having tortured and burned them alive.²⁰⁹

Mujahidin and Pakistani officials were heavily incriminated to manhandle thousands of Afghan refugees that, after having taken refuge in Pakistan were not allowed to return to their native country. Soviet propagandistic *Krasnaya Zvezda*, in its release of February 27, 1983, charged the Islamic rebels with the construction of cell prisons where to confine Afghan people who were trying to leave Pakistani reception camps.²¹⁰ The maltreatment within refugee camps and the denial of the possibility to depart from them was transformed into a main topic of discussion for Soviet media that inclined to accentuate the dreadful behaviour of USSR enemies, as it was preannounced in the antecedent publication of *Pravda* of December 22, 1980.²¹¹

Therefore, until the end of 1983, as it is possible to notice by the mentioned newspapers, the political perception of the Soviet-Afghan War, within the Soviet Union, was nearly inexistent. No military action by Soviet soldiers was recounted and the invasion, in the strict sense, had no media resonance. A Soviet sergeant, stationed in Kabul, in this respect, wrote to the USSR newspaper

²⁰⁶ *Pravda*, December 7, 1982.

²⁰⁷ *Pravda*, February 21, 1989.

²⁰⁸ *Turkmenskaya Iskra*, March 11, 1980.

²⁰⁹ Aleksandr Nikonenko, "Место Службы – Афганистан" ("Mesto Sluzhby – Afganistan"), *Pravda Vostoka*, June 17, 1985.

²¹⁰ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, February 27, 1983.

²¹¹ *Pravda*, December 22, 1980.

Komsomolskaya Pravda to express his astonishment at the reduced echo the risky and dangerous armed operations they were running had.²¹²

Especially in July 1983, the editors of *Krasnaya Zvezda* kept on providing notable coverage to Soviet work in Afghanistan, always ignoring the military side. The varied linked topics around the “Afghan matter” covered different percentages of space within the releases, according to the prominence the propaganda desired to give to the single themes. The everyday activities of Soviet military units occupied almost the 55% of the newspaper, followed by the Afghan government amnesty granted to regretted Islamic revolutionaries and the armed actions of the Afghan state army against the mujahidin with a percentage of 29%, the Afghanistan-Pakistan talks, mainly concerning the situation of Afghan refugees and their repatriation held almost the 10%; the remaining 6% of the media space was covered by the accusations against the foreign intervention in support of mujahidin, addressing against Pakistan and, most of all, the United States. Particular attention was reserved to the beneficial deeds of Soviet military medics and doctors, able to cure and heal wounded Soviet soldiers in a very short time. The exaltation of their work was functional to diffuse, among the public opinion, the idea of the functionality of the national healthcare system, concealing, in addition the serious losses within the 40th Army. The reference article dates back July 17, 1983.²¹³ Another fundamental subject of propagandistic interest was the enhancement of the skilfulness of Soviet helicopter personnel and ground crew, excelling at performing their role, such as did the troops themselves. Besides supporting the Afghan army to defeat the Islamic counter-revolutionaries, they contributed to repair roads, bridges, houses and to dig wells in the devastated villages around the capital, securing the gratitude of the Afghan civil population. The office of Soviet engineers was fundamental and highly extolled in their helping inhabitants of remote villages scattered in Afghanistan to build up systems of irrigation to water the agricultural fields and crops. Soviet forces, furthermore, scheduled reintegration plans for those who manage to return from Pakistan, indoctrinating them to set up a sort of self-defence units to provide assistance to the Afghan army. A point that Soviet propaganda intensively stressed was the increasing support the local community granted to the fight against the mujahidin and dissidents of the DRA, backing the soldiers to uproot the rebel bands. The sustain of Afghan inhabitants was essential also, and above all, to eradicate American imperialism spreading among the counter-revolutionaries.²¹⁴

²¹² *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, February 10, 1984.

²¹³ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, July 17, 1983.

²¹⁴ Special Operations Division and Organisation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Soviet News and Propaganda Analysis, *Red Star* 3, no. 7 (1-31 July 1983): 17.

3.1.3 1984: the first disclosure of Soviet costs

Only at the end of 1984 the media began to admit that Soviet servicemen were dying at the hands of the rebel mujahidin. Media perseverated in insisting upon the worth and moral value of the Soviet soldiers that were bravely battling to support the Afghan society in its struggle against Islamic dissidents, raising them as heroes scarifying their lives to save the allies' ones.²¹⁵ The Soviet press kept limiting to report factual events in Afghanistan only in terms that could underline the advancement in bilateral cooperative relationship, emphasising the defence of the socialist DRA and the socio-economic reciprocal progresses.²¹⁶ Occasionally, Soviet casualties were mentioned, but the attention of the readers was immediately shifted to the extolling of the camaraderie, the material values and the excitement of the military daily life for the Soviet soldiers. However, Soviet fallout and effective losses remained unknown, since the Soviets had dealt with expelling western journalists and tightening up the censorship to lower the profile of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, confining it within the rank of news of secondary significance. Reports of the combats were dispersive, easy to be altered and to be confirmed, and they hid Soviet atrocities, as the use of chemical weapons, for example.²¹⁷

The focal point dwelled on the respect the local people reserved toward the Soviet servicemen, elevated to heroes and considered as trustworthy friends. *Pravda*, on August 13, 1984 and on September 2, 1984, published two relevant articles, entitled "Iscrennij drug, nadezhnyj partner", that is "A sincere friend, a reliable partner",²¹⁸ and "Yazik druzej",²¹⁹ meaning "The language of friends", with the intentions to reiterate the appreciated and enjoyed coexistence between Afghans and Soviets. DRA armed units and Afghan civilians were grateful to the USSR Army for its inexhaustible source of strategical inspiration and material aid, also, and above all, for tiring construction and restructuring works of destroyed infrastructures.

Besides the propensity to excite admiration for the Soviet soldiers, the propagandistic media, especially during the 1984, rather than deferring a broad reportage over the terrible conditions that were unnerving and wearying them, very often, after a word on the developments of the compatriots, preferred to direct the concentration over the victorious military strikes were facing.

²¹⁵ *Sovetskaya kirgiziya*, June 23, 1987.

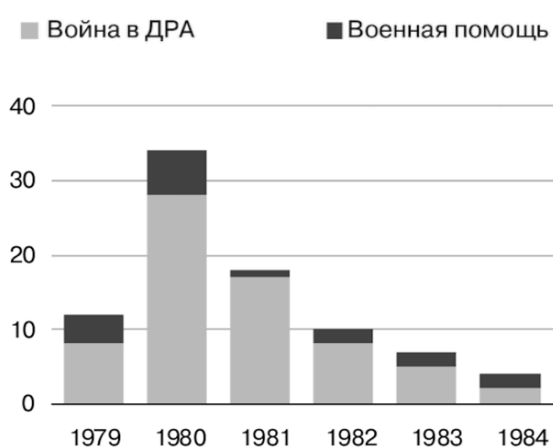
²¹⁶ "Report on the Situation in Afghanistan, Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev to CPSU CC, 29 November 1979, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, APRF, f. 3, op. 82, d. 173, s. 118-127. Available at: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111576>.

²¹⁷ David Charters, "Resistance to the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan: Problems and Prospects," 1980: 11-12. Available at: <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/.../15553>.

²¹⁸ Victor N. Bajkov, "Искренний друг, надежный партнер" ("Iscrennij drug, nadezhnyj partner"), *Pravda*, August 13, 1984.

²¹⁹ "Язык друзей" ("Yazik druzej"), *Pravda*, September 2, 1984.

“Afganistan boretcya, Afganistan pobezhdaet”, “Afghanistan is struggling, Afghanistan wins”, announced *Ogonyok* in April 1984.²²⁰ This is a further demonstration of the monothematic news about the progress and the trend of the war. The DRA troops, backed by Afghan inhabitants, were harshly fighting against the aggressors, that is the mujahidin supported by Americans and Pakistanis. They were bringing several victories as a result of the smashes against the enemies and thanks to the technical and moral backing provided by the Soviets that suffered from casualties, injured men and substantial losses of arms and military equipment because of the unilateral offensives of the mujahidin. The Soviet troops fired back only for protection and self-defence.



The diagram on the left (Fig.1) summarises the percentage of the two dominant thematic topics within the widespread propagandistic articles, between 1979 and 1984. The light grey square of the label represents the “War in DRA”, the dark grey one “the military assistance”, by the Soviet Union.

It clearly shows, in proportion, the little coverage of the 40th Army’s military intervention.

Рисунок 1. Тематические доминанты: 1979-1984 годы
 Fig. 1. “Tematicheskie dominanty: 1979-1984 gody”, from Natalja Avdovina, *Исполнившие интернациональный долг: Образ «афганца» в советских средствах массовой информации* (May 2015), 195.

3.2 “Wind of change” in the national Soviet propaganda

Until 1985, the coverage of the war in Afghanistan was well established and singularly coordinated in order to give all the blames and credits within the armed conflict to the DRA, paying to attention not to mention any invasive or armed attack guided by the Soviet Union. The aim was a sort of whole “Afghanisation” of the war. Soviet troops could not be taxed with violence, they did not fire off neither killed counter-revolutionaries nor civilians, their unique duty was to bring some international multilevel aid.

On June 19, 1985, the Soviet Minister of Defence, Sergey F. Achromeev, together with the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Georgy Korniyenko and the Deputy Chairman of the KGB Vladimir A. Kryuchov, issued an official document, whose title was “List of information allowed for open publication, regarding the limited contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan”. The

²²⁰ “Афганистан борется, Афганистан побеждает” (“Afganistan boretcya, Afganistan pobezhdaet”), *Ogonyok*, April 7, 1984.

document set up that the permitted publication would concern information about the military accommodation, without showing the participation in hostilities, the distribution of fighting units, the combat training, the soldiers' everyday routine, but without going into detail of the battalion's structure in its wholeness. Therefore, the agreement conferred the right of relating military life of Soviet forces, but generally speaking, without referring to any specific combat, so, showing separate and single facts. Furthermore, news regarding the Afghan war should be communicated once per month. The cases of death or injury of Soviet soldiers had to be contextualised within a framework of performance of their military office, returning fire against a rebel attack or while they were executing their brief of providing international assistance to the Afghan population, cheating death.²²¹ The disclosure of active and propositional implication of Soviet troops within the firefights was still banned, as direct television reports from the battlefields were.

In addition, the paper allowed publications about some cases of heroic enterprises by the Soviet military personnel in order to display their courage and steadiness, and data describing the rewarding for soldiers showing extraordinary courage and bravery.

The permission to issue the aforementioned information was granted to the central press of Moscow, to the press of military districts and to regional press, following the consultation and concordance of the General Military censorship.

The wide-ranging diffusion of materials that proved Western media wrong increased and was still motivated. It was a sort of counter-Western propagandistic campaign, that continued to be demanded and supported even within the document of June 1985.

Deeper metamorphoses would be achieved one year later, in 1986, that would become a pivotal year for the political, and consequently, media course of the Soviet Union. The figure of reference, who gave the decisive push to a less censored propaganda, was Mikhail Gorbachev.

3.2.1 *Glasnost* in Soviet propagandistic media

On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Following his policy of *glasnost*, literally meaning publicity, public domain, whose contextual translation was naturalised into transparency, a series of changes became the active feature of these years. *Glasnost* would transform into a real cornerstone of the new Soviet era of media coverage, that, gradually, would reach a higher level of frankness and openness to an ever-huger spread information.

At the beginning, boundaries of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, however, were outlined too vaguely to be taken seriously by Soviet reporters, that began to emphasise news concerning foreign policy,

²²¹ I. Belousov and A. Kachanov, "Что от нас скрывали?" ("Chti in nas skyvali?"), *Труд*, June 23, 1992.

taking as an example the war in Afghanistan, relevant for this thesis, but evolving the reportage of the events into an anecdotal fairy-like account of Soviet heroics abroad, rather than an exhaustive and impartial page. So, 1985 was not a propitious moment to effectively integrate the new political trend within the media front.

Only in 1986, and afterwards, the “New Political Thinking”, implemented by Gorbachev himself, came into being within the multiplicity of levels of the state communist apparatus, implicating even radical modifications in the mass media sector.²²² The General Secretary, plainly, declared that the Afghan war had not to be anymore fought by the Soviets. His foreign policy would be addressed towards a progressive strengthening of Afghan forces, in order to make them autonomous. Gorbachev’s decline in the ideological support to the war would be the final jostle to release the media from the news blackout.

After the 27th Party Congress from February 25 to March 6, 1986, the inclination towards a higher outspokenness and absence of reserve in the running of news by the media and the censorship was asserted. Troublesome and uncomfortable questions as the excessive bowdlerisation of information, the alcohol and drug abuse within the Soviet Union, the moral and ideological crisis, financial difficulties and foreign policy awkward matters started to be more openly tackled. The central press in Moscow soon adapted to the new policies, whereas, the local press, displaced within the huge territory of the USSR, revealed not to be prompt and decisive, as *Pravda*²²³ and *Sovetskaya Rossiya* themselves contested.²²⁴ Even the central newspaper *Izvestiya* was much interested in the cause of ensuring more freedom of expression concerning Soviet foreign policy matters and on the release of January 18, 1986, the reporter Aleksandr Bovin, made an appeal to call for more media coverage about occurrences involving Soviet Union, but on foreign soils.²²⁵ *Izvestiya* introduced a permanent column in its publications, entitled “Echo”, that was reserved to the promulgation of public opinions relatively to burning issues, even publishing readers’ open letters and remarks.

Sometime later than the print media, Soviet radio and television tailored to the uncensored circulation and, from almost 1987, they started to diffuse interviews with Western political leaders, journalists and experts, extremely expanding the amount of live air programmes.

From June 28 to July 11, 1988 the 19th Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was held, during which Gorbachev stated plural focal points. The quantity and quality of information about foreign international questions should be revisited in substance, through the

²²² Donald Mahoney, “Soviet press enters new stage in coverage of Afghan war,” *Radio Liberty Research* (RL) 337/87, August 18, 1987, 1-4.

²²³ *Pravda*, December 12, 1985.

²²⁴ *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, February 1, 5, 1986.

²²⁵ Aleksandr Bovin, *Izvestiya*, January 18, 1986.

setting up of a renewed mechanised system in charge of distributing circulating information on Soviet foreign policy, in the respect of constitutional precepts. The appendix of *glasnost* meant the additional possibility of presenting a multiple point of view, granting freedom of opinion both at political and civilian levels.²²⁶

In conclusion, any difference on the informative approach pursued by Soviet journalists, correspondents and announcers started to be made effective already in 1986 with regard to domestic policy issues; topics about international and foreign problems, on the contrary, would be eased out of censorship starting from 1987, in order to make effective and complete their liberalisation around 1988.

3.2.2 A more transparent coverage of the Afghan case

Until the end of 1986, despite the possibility of recounting the war facts in a more accurate and free manner, the tone picked for the journalistic descriptions was high-sounding and ostentatious. The disposition of the media was still addressed towards the exaltation of the fighting soldiers that, in several occasions, were nominated as fearless warriors. In October 1986, *Pravda*, *Ogonyok* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* opted for employing such expression to report the returning home of the first six Soviet regiments from Afghanistan, deeply thanking the anonymous combatants for their international aid, for their protection of the roads around the Afghan capital that had been their main duty.²²⁷

The year 1987 was inaugurated with an article by *Literaturnaya Gazeta* that directly broach the theme of the fire-war, deploring its excessive length.²²⁸ The advice promoted by the gazette was to widen the Soviet army, enriching it with sons and grandsons of high cultural and ranking exponents, since, and this idea was shared even by *Pravda*,²²⁹ if the troops were formed by members of the intelligentsia and leaders' children, providing an effective moral support, along with collective farmers and workers, guaranteeing the physical contribution, the war would end very soon.

Concomitantly, stories regarding the miserable treatment of the soldiers, both in Afghanistan and once back to Soviet Union, arose, accusing Soviet citizens and bureaucrats of not considering the *afgantsy*, that is the veterans who had fought in the Afghan war, as honoured guests. The human face of the Afghan war and the inadequate handling of the veterans became the core issues of the articles of 1987. They managed to reawaken a sense of solidarity among the civil society that stood together and started to share the collective responsibility for the Soviet decision of having sent

²²⁶ *Pravda*, June 29, 1988.

²²⁷ Boris Sopelnyak, "Цветы на броне" ("Zvety na brone"), *Ogonyok*, October 25, 1986.

²²⁸ *Literaturnaya Pravda*, February 4, 1987.

²²⁹ *Pravda*, November 25, 1987.

troops to Afghanistan, offering to collaborate to favour the post-war social adaptation of the veterans.²³⁰

The Soviet soldiers that were fighting or had fought in Afghanistan began to be worshiped by the written propaganda that dedicated huger space to the description of their personalities and glorious feats. More often, the choice of the terms to name the soldiers was directed to the appellative of warriors, differently from what happened around 1983. They began not to be anonymous, but concretely nominated with their given names to point out their prowess. *Pravda Severa* instituted a section called “My – internationalisty”, “We are the internationalist”, where, in 1987 appeared, for the first time in the history of the journal, a short note “Missiya in Kabul”, “The mission in Kabul”, consisting of the storytelling of a war veteran, identified with his personal data, photographs and daily diary pages. It became a sort of additional biographic column to the newspaper. The trend to complete the articles, regarding the events in Afghanistan, with biographical material about who were the Soviet heroes of that war, quickly spread among the principal press centres. A pioneer of such supplementary space devoted to biographies was Artyom Borovik, a prominent Soviet journalist and son of the Chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee, Genrikh Borovik and a major editor of *Ogonyok*. He can be considered the advocate of such implementation, since, already around 1985, he autonomously dedicated himself to the investigative journalism, being one of the earliest to take full advantage of the not yet well-defined principles of *glasnost*. He looked for unpublished and inedited news, digging deeper into Soviet servicemen’s private lives and personal experiences.

From July 11 to 25, 1987, in a series of reports, recorded under the heading of “Vstretimzya u trech zhurnavlej”, meaning “We meet at the three cranes”, he revealed the explicit and unequivocal activities in which soldiers from USSR were implicated in Afghanistan. Using the exact words, excerpted from their diaries,²³¹ he presented the war heroes in their complete humanity, stripping them of their invincible and inhuman force of will that, after the showing of their living conditions, battles and barbaric surrounding situation, seemed more a struggle for survival. The tone was purely romantic.

Further exemplifications of the materiality and concreteness carefully given to the characters of the narration of the Afghan war can be found in *Pravda*. “V chas ispytaniya”, “The test hour”,²³² talking about three Soviet servicemen in Afghanistan and about their deeds, and the essay “Dvazdhy ispytan”, that translated signifies “Tested twice”, a sort of biography of the hero of the Soviet Union, Ruslan Aushev,²³³ are two of them. The peculiarity of the mentioned articles,

²³⁰ *Pravda*, April 5, 1987.

²³¹ Artyom Borovik, “Встретимся у трех журавлей” (“Vstretimzya u trech zhurnavlej”), *Ogonyok*, July 11, 1987.

²³² “В час испытания” (“V chas ispytaniya”), *Pravda*, April 4, 1987.

²³³ “Дважды испытан” (“Dvazdhy ispytan”), *Pravda*, October 5, 1987.

published in April and October 1987, is the fact that they were not far from being essays. In fact, they were accompanied by a rich photo coverage of the protagonists.

Furthermore, *Pravda* was one of the first newspaper to attach to the items some messages of the readers. “Ya vas v Afganistan ne posylal”, that means “I did not send you to Afghanistan”, issued in August 1987, was a collection of letters of reply to the most recent journalistic pieces. A case in point is the vexed letter written by the father of a Soviet young soldier dead in Afghanistan, accusing *Pravda*, and generally the mass media, to write about an unrealistic Afghan war,²³⁴ making it less harsh that it really was, not giving an overall view and telling the facts in a superficial way, almost disrespectful for those who were fighting that battle and for the broken families.

Sobesednik, *Moscow News*, *Ogonyok* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* followed the example of *Pravda* and Borovik himself, supplementing their releases with a weekly addendum, incontrovertibly giving an account of the growing protest, mainly among the young Soviet population, against the controversial situation in Afghanistan. Popular position was far from being favourable to Soviet involvement within a further war, especially after the promulgation of a totally transparent media policy. In those years, central newspapers, together with their articles, almost kept on enclosing letters sent to the editors by the reading public in which they expressed their criticism towards the melodramatic tone that embellished the form to the detriment of the content. Once the public had come into contact with reality, it wanted to go all the way, without settling for half-truths. According to the statistics drew by *Ogonyok*, only the 5% of all the received letters spoke in favour of a continuation of the war, confident of a victorious finale. The majority of the readers asked for an immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops, putting an end to the involvement of the USSR.²³⁵

The extension of the Soviet contingent sent to fight in Afghanistan was made public, and the same was for the number of Soviet casualties. Money started to be collected to build up a hospital in the near Kazakhstan, precisely in the city of Alma-Ata, to hospitalise the injured soldiers.²³⁶ A more realistic and three-dimensional illustration of the ongoing Afghan war began to be depicted, without masking anymore the military strength of the rebel mujahidin; but the past occupational hazard, sporadically, kept on influencing the achieved frankness. News published by different newspapers did not always coincide, principally when numeric data were emphasised. *Moscow News*, in its release of June 21, 1987, declared that there were more than 100,000 armed mujahidin in Afghanistan, subdivided within 3,000 units,²³⁷ whereas, in the same month, a reporter from *Tass*

²³⁴ “Я вас в Афганистан не посылал” (“Ya vas v Afganistan ne posylal”), *Pravda*, August 5, 1987.

²³⁵ Artyom Borovik, “What kind of war was this?”, *U.S. News & World Report*, May 30, 1988: 32.

²³⁶ *Pravda*, April 4, 1987.

²³⁷ *Moscow News*, June 21, 1987.

uttered that the dangerous Islamic groups, organising attacks, amounted to 2,000 squads.²³⁸ Soviet pilots of aircrafts and helicopters were subjected to mujahidin's anti-aircraft operations.²³⁹ Despite the more pragmatic delineation of the war, the military press continued to optimistically make predictions on the future developments, balancing the victories and the setbacks.

The official discovery of the war was the demonstration that the international duty converted into a pure military duty, now regarding the defence and safeguard of the Soviet motherland, rather than the protection of Afghanistan. From a merely foreign and emotionally detached event, the war became a question of safety of the southern borders, transforming into a top priority of domestic affairs, especially in the public's mind. The heroic representation of the soldiers, to which the mass media interested during the biennium 1986-1987, was progressively replaced by critical analyses of the reasons at the base of the decision to send troops to Afghanistan. Borovik, on January 23, 1988, published an article titled "Desant. Severnee Kabula", translated into "The landing. North of Kabul", in *Ogonyok*, where he unreservedly quoted a Soviet soldier declaring that there was already blood when he arrived in Kabul. The only explication he received was a concise word, internationalism,²⁴⁰ meaning that the costs to provide international aid to foreign people were high, even in human lives.

More frequently and openly, the verdict of participating in the Afghan war was judged as a serious mistake, especially by the unsatisfied mass public. It was assessed as a political event, harshly criticised, although the authorities in charge in the USSR in the second half of the 1980s were not the responsible for such a decision. The soldiers asked for a higher attention by the Politburo and for a greater media coverage.

On February 9, 1988, Gorbachev published his statement on *Komsomolskaya Pravda* to extensively announce that the Soviet soldiers who had fought in the war in Afghanistan would be rewarded for their service with a prior opportunity of getting a good education and a lucrative work in the motherland. Those who died would deserve a sacred eternal memory.²⁴¹ *Ogonyok*, almost right after, distributed an article where, through the perspective of a Soviet soldier, showed an overview of the policies proposed by Mohammad Najibullah to achieve an Afghan national pacification. Such line was heavily seconded by Gorbachev that, in the same month, submitted to hypothetically withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Not to make it excessively evident and, above all, not to make it seem an escape, the USSR General Secretary, at the meeting of the Politburo of April 18, 1988, stated the necessity to prove worldwide that the Soviet military

²³⁸ Boris Pyadyshev, *Tass*, July 16, 1987.

²³⁹ *Aviatsiya i kosmonavtika*, June 6, 1987.

²⁴⁰ Borovik, "Десант. Севернее Кабула" ("Desant. Severnee Kabula"), *Ogonyok*, January 21, 1988.

²⁴¹ "Заявление Генерального секретаря ЦК КПСС М. С. Горбачева по Афганистану" (Zayavlenie Generalnogo sekretarya ZK KPSS M. S. Gorbachev apo Afganistanu), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, February 9, 1988.

officers and forces were continuing to fulfil their international duty. The presence of Soviet military forces, that had not been definitively dismantled yet, being the withdrawal a progressive process, in Gorbachev's view, had to be justified. This was the reason why he browbeat the propaganda not to thoroughly abolish the coverage over the heroic actions of the troops that were still on the Afghan soil.

Articles began to encourage the homecoming of the Soviet soldiers, holding them up as the highest example of patriotism and honour.²⁴² They had accomplished their international duty and now, triumphant, they should rejoin their compatriots that were waiting to celebrate them.²⁴³

Therefore, as it is tangible, the official rhetoric of the Soviet leadership was replicated in the propagandistic media.

Pessimistic articles accused the decision-making under Brezhnev, questioning the principles of the Soviet intervention, the distorted nature of the foreign policy pursued by the USSR during the previous decade and the employment of a violent activism in the Third World only as a means to shift the focus from domestic difficulties. Aleksandr Bovin, resolutely, declared to *Izvestiya* that garrisoning troops in Afghanistan was the manifest emblem of the arbitrary Soviet propensity to make use of military coercion in foreign policy.²⁴⁴

The Soviet Union was about to leave Afghanistan, it was the official Gorbachev's word. Soviet commentators, editors and officials did not hold back their opinions anymore: they carried on speaking more plainly and without restraint, lashing out at the Afghan war and the motiveless participation of the Soviet Union. Aleksandr Prokhanov, a member of the Union of Soviet Writers from 1972 and a convinced advocate of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, who made every effort to persuade the masses, justifying Brezhnev's decision, in 1988 changed his mind. He released his words to *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, claiming the collapse of the ten-year armed liaison of the USSR and the imminent indispensability of hearing the needs of the civil society of the mid-to late 1980s, calling for the military retreat. Since the Afghan internal civil friction did not smooth out, he and all those who were favourable, could only agonise over the Soviet wrong predictions.²⁴⁵ In 1989, the concentration of the media would be mostly addressed towards the *afgantsy*; the term OKSV, that is the limited contingent of Soviet troops, disappeared. The turning point for the linguistic shift was provided by the day February 15, 1989, that is the date of the withdrawal of the Soviet armed units from Afghanistan. The journalists used it as the last occasion to point out again the heroic deeds of Soviet servicemen fulfilling their international duty and securing Soviet

²⁴² Aleksandr Gorochov and Okulov Valery, "Домой" ("Domoj"), *Pravda*, May 16, 1988.

²⁴³ "Возвращение домой" ("Vozrashenie domoj"), *Ogonyok*, May 28, 1988.

²⁴⁴ *Izvestiya*, June 15, 1988.

²⁴⁵ *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, February 17, 1988.

southern borders, as for example *Pravda*.²⁴⁶ *Pravda Severa*, for instance, in the article of February 23, “Pomnim vas, rebyata iz Afgana”, “We remember you, guys from Afghanistan”, praised the veterans who came back from the war, for their dedication and devotion to the Soviet motherland.²⁴⁷

The same tendency was followed by the releases of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* from February 7 to 15, that began to present the word “vojna”, in English “war”, in all the headlines, “Domoj, s vojny”, “Pro vojnu”, “S vojnoj pokonchili my schety?”, whose translations are “To home from the war”, “About the war” and “Did we put an end to the war accounts?”²⁴⁸

After February, Soviet media diverted their interest to the building up of a political consciousness that would reserve particular attention to the figure of the *afgantsy*, to their adaption to civil society, rehabilitation, special guarantees and to their war mementos. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, during the year 1989, published several articles concerning the war in Afghanistan. Some dealt with the theme of the veterans, their memories and letters, and others were intended to fill the gap of information about the war of the past years. The titles of reference are “Ver i zhdi”, “Believe and wait” (February 15),²⁴⁹ “Odnazhdy vecherom, posle vojny...”, “One evening, after the war” (March 17),²⁵⁰ “Dnevnik odnoj rotы”, “The diary of a company” (April 15),²⁵¹ “Dvoe na odnoj vojne” “Two wars into one” (April 22),²⁵² “Chochu rasskazat’ pravdu ob Afganistane” “I want to tell the truth about Afghanistan” (December 15)²⁵³ and “Strashno chotelos’ zhit’”, “Afraid to want to live” (December 21).²⁵⁴

Therefore, contextualising, the media coverage, after February 15, 1989, that is after the definitive departure of Soviet soldiers from Afghanistan, on a decision of Mikhail Gorbachev, would concentrate on the return to real life by the veterans and on their essentials. The focus would be even on the inquiry of the actual grounds that drove Brezhnev to invade Afghanistan almost ten years earlier, giving rise to polemics and accusations by the members of the society. The comments of the editors of newspapers as *Pravda*, *Pravda Severa*, *Ogonyok*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* persevered in describing the Soviet *afgantsy* as modern heroes, unfairly sent to fight for a cause initially limited to providing international assistance, and this is not surprising. The media acted

²⁴⁶ *Pravda*, February 15, 1989.

²⁴⁷ Nikolaj Eremeev, “Помним вас, ребята из Афгана” (“Pomnim vas, rebyata iz Afgana”), *Pravda Severa*, February 23, 1989.

²⁴⁸ I. Rudenko, “С войной покончили мы счеты?” (“S vojnoj pokonchili my schety?”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, February 15, 1989.

²⁴⁹ “Верь и жди” (Ver i zhdi”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, February 15, 1989.

²⁵⁰ “Однажды вечером, после войны...” (“Odnazhdy vecherom, posle vojny...”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 17, 1989.

²⁵¹ “Дневник одной роты” (“Dnevnik odnoj rotы”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 15, 1989.

²⁵² “Двое на одной войне” (“Dvoe na odnoj vojne”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 22, 1989.

²⁵³ “Хочу рассказать правду об Афганистане” (“Chochu rasskazat’ pravdu ob Afganistane”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 15, 1989.

²⁵⁴ “Страшно хотелось жить” (“Strashno chotelos’ zhit’”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 21, 1989.

as the mouthpiece of the leadership of the Soviet Union. They had always performed in accordance to the Politburo, holding a primary role in the diffusion and consecutive propaganda of the official view and, more often, version of the facts of the higher authorities of the USSR.

To conclude, the graph on the right (Fig.2) recapitulates the coverage given to the Afghan situation from 1986, after the “opening of the war”, thanks to the *glasnost*.

The showed tendency reflects a net decrease in the percentage of media reporting about the mere war in Afghanistan (light grey) and a definite increase in the news concerning the participation of the Soviet soldiers within the war (dark grey).

What is evident is the inverse trend compared to the prior period of time (Fig.1).



Рисунок 2. «Открытие войны»: 1986–1989 годы

Fig. 2. “Otkrytie vojny: 1986-1989gody”, from Natalja Avdovina, *Исполнившие интернациональный долг: Образ «афганца» в советских средствах массовой информации* (May 2015), 198.

3.3 The Soviet propaganda: a means to widen the consensus in Afghanistan

The propaganda machine of the Soviet Union did not run only in the motherland. On the contrary, it was an essential element in Afghanistan too. In this case, in situ, the Soviet necessity was to persuade the local population that the troops’ stationing was the direct result of a specific request by the new leader Karmal, whose appointment was the accomplishment of a legitimate course. Citizens of Kabul, unaware of the organised military invasion and of the planning for the replacement of the DRA presidency, awakened and found a sudden change of the political scene, having no say. Soviet efforts, in order to avoid further civil insurrections, devoted to make their military garrisoning and active participation authorised and lawful.

Neither in Kabul itself the Soviet censorship agreed to a diffusion of news, as it did, domestically, during the first phases of the war. On December 25, 1979, the morning following the invasion, a radio broadcast, asserting of being the state official Radio Kabul, proclaimed that Babrak Karmal had finally seized his legitimate power and had asked for a “fraternal military assistance to the Soviet Union”. The reality showed that the communication was broadcasted from the Soviet headquarters in the Afghan capital city.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 402.

The radio quickly became an overriding form of propaganda in Afghanistan, where, besides being very diffused, it represented a fundamental means of communication among an illiterate or semi-literate population. It could even reach the female population that was excluded from the socio-political life. However, the Soviet propaganda faced an important limitation, due to the linguistic issue. Russian language was not understood by the local population and, so, Soviet broadcasts could not become primary sources of propagandistic information neither channels of communication. Conversely, the Islamic adversary of the DRA would exploit the radio through transmissions spread in different languages and dialects, accusing the Soviets of being illegitimate invaders and tormentors.

Therefore, the print media remained the best form of propaganda for the Soviet Union, that tried to ideologically and psychologically influence the population. Small printed slips, leaflets and illustrated posters with cartoons and images had a direct impact over the specific audience of Afghan inhabitants. Together with the printed pages, another main tool of political propaganda consisted of the hand-drawn booklet that, colourfully and professionally, represented significant cartoons holding a deeper plot summarised in few catchy words. The support of the armed forces of the DRA was of primary importance, translating the inscriptions and having a deeper knowledge of the local cultural traditions.

The cartoons were drawn on paper bags for food, on match boxes and on polyvinyl cups, stickers, calendars and patches, with the aim of being largely diffused through everyday objects.

In mid-1983, in two-month courses held in Kabul, Soviet cartoonists, Ivan Michajlin and Nikolaj Ludanov, trained their 22 Afghan disciples to arrange further propagandistic visual material. In spite of the huge diffusion such leaflets had, their echo did not spread in the Afghan provinces. Furthermore, the lack of a printing press at the Soviet military base made the duplication more difficult; for the distribution the Soviets employed the air dumping.²⁵⁶

To have a more concrete view of the ideological reverberation the Soviet pamphlets had, the analysis of their bodies is essential. The genre design was illustrative, presenting both captions and images. A leaflet, dated 1982 and signed by the DRA military units, on the first side showed a short dedication in Arabic “In the name of the merciful Allah to the noble compatriots”; on the reverse side the writing was against the counter-revolutionaries mujahidin, reporting “Over the past three years, the rebels have destroyed 1,813 schools, 3 hospitals, 111 rural clinics and killed thousands of innocent people. The leaders, for their crimes, received from the United States, Germany, England more than \$500 million. Death to criminals and their imperialist masters!”. It was printed in black and white, since the colour printing began to be employed only in 1985.

²⁵⁶ Fogel', “Особенности пропаганды СССР во время военной акции в Афганистане: 1979-1989 гг.” (“Osobennosti propagandy SSSR vo vremja voennoj akzii v Afganistane: 1979-1989 gg.”), 20-22; 27-28.

Any contact with the mujahidin had to be avoided, since it could be deadly, due to their wickedness and disaffection for life; the state Afghan soldiers, and the Soviet as well, were forbidden to socialise with the enemy. In this regard, the following leaflet (Fig. 3) quoted a Soviet warning: “It is forbidden to have unauthorised communications, acquaintance!”.

It openly showed the perilousness, perfidiousness and falseness of the Islamic combatants, thoroughly advising not to come into contact with them.



Fig. 3. “Сборник материалов по контр-пропагандистской работе, январь 1987 года,” *Советская пропаганда в Афганистане.*

Until 1986, the style adopted by the Soviet Union and its ally, the DRA, followed some basic principles to attract the attention of the Afghan public, trying to convince it about the gratuitous violence of the mujahidin towards their compatriots, more counting on the discrediting of the enemy, rather than on the demonstration of the bravura and social interest of the pro-communist revolutionary Karmal’s government. The Soviet Union would manage the propagandistic enterprise but staying aloof. It was even part of the general project. As mentioned, the Soviet purpose was addressed towards a legitimisation of USSR troops garrisoning, justifiable by the close alliance between the Soviet Union and the Afghan government. Therefore, an increasing popular support for the DRA would mean a more stable broadmindedness for the friendly foreign armed forces.

Since 1987, the direction followed by the Soviet print media propaganda in Afghanistan changed. The appeals of the DRA began to be oriented to the mujahidin, instead of the civil society. The fitting example is that of a coloured leaflet, introducing an analytical and informative text about the ongoing process for the cessation of internal hostilities between the new Afghan president Najibullah and the rebel forces. The handbill declared the official signing of a peace agreement with 75 combatant units and of negotiations with other warlords in the province of Kunduz. “Go

and you will be safe. This will ensure your life!”. The call for rapprochement was illustrated with a handshake between a DRA soldier and a mujahidin militant, holding in his hand a peace treaty. Another brochure, signed by the DRA and sponsored by the Soviet Union, dating 1988, reflected an eloquent attempt to invite the Afghan people to sustain the policy of the national government in the name of the national reconciliation. The illustration represented the punishing hands of Allah and sharp arrows to castigate them who continued to spill blood, although the necessary conditions to bring peace had been arranged.

In 1989, the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan and it became a further topic of propagandistic diffusion. Descriptive handouts, unreservedly addressed to the noble Afghans, were employed to express gratitude to the Soviet soldiers for their constant assistance in preserving freedom and independence in Afghanistan. The ending note cited “Safe trip. May your bread be hot and your water cold.”²⁵⁷

So, the aforementioned cases are indicative to penetrate into the logic employed by the Soviet Union to hoard the benevolence of the civil people.

It is possible to say that the Afghan war, in situ, has been fought even at level of propaganda. The rebel mujahidin, in fact, counterattacked Soviet-DRA leaflets with functional placards and handbills of immediate impact. The prize of this media war was the reaching of the highest number of ideological followers, that could reveal decisive to defeat the enemy.

Another form of propaganda exercised by the Soviet Union in this war, through its military units present on the territory, was the visual one. It consisted in scattering equipped rest rooms for Soviets and Afghans, to strengthen their friendship, checkpoints, urban “friendships’ centres”, medical stations for the population, drop-off points to deliver staple products and necessities to the people. The strategic zones were full of bills and posters on the walls, stating that the Soviet Army was the defender of the working people. The desired outcome was not achieved, since the slogan was not much significant for the Afghan population; the term “worker” did evoke nothing.²⁵⁸

The psychological impact over the local population was attempted to be perceived by the Soviet Union even employing the spreading of rumours, initiated by the Soviet military resources themselves to create some chain reactions among the civilians. The aim, again, was the discrediting of the figure of the mujahidin, through anecdotes. A fitting example is the Soviet operation destined to blame the field commander of the mujahidin, Mirzo Rachima, identified as a respected Muslim man, frightened by the Soviet troops, that, because of his lack of bravery, had caused the

²⁵⁷ “Документы советского руководства о положении в Афганистане”, *Новая и новейшая история* н. 3 (“Documenty sovetskoho rukovodstva o polozhenii v Afganistane”, *Novaja i novejšhaya istoriya* n.3) (1996), 44-49.

²⁵⁸ Viktor A. Merimskij, “Война в Афганистане. Записки участника”, *Новая и новейшая история* н.3 (Vojna v Afganistane. Zapiski uchastnika”, *Novaja i novejšhaya istoriya* n.3) (1995).

death of almost 70 of his men. The information was diffused by different channels of communication and the result was the murder of the leader. To attribute more truthfulness to the tale, several names of the dead Islamic rebels were indicated.²⁵⁹ Unfortunately, it was very complicated for the DRA and the USSR to arrive until the rural provinces of Afghanistan, where the Islamic counter-revolutionary dominance was absolute and undisputed. So, while Kabul could be carried towards the communist direction, the countryside would remain an unsolvable matter. Oral political campaigns were employed by the DRA, and the special services of the Soviet Union, as a further means of propaganda. It was considered one of the more effective, due to the general illiteracy of the Afghans. Personal conversations with groups of people and simple debates with the low-educated Afghan society were judged as a direct form of communication and convincement. University professors, teachers, mullahs and secular authorities were trained by the Soviet experts in order to be involved within the oral propaganda machine, whose outcome would be a permanent cultivated staff of the government, formed by tens of thousands of people. Despite the huge efforts of the Soviet Union, that tried to back the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and strained to make communist ideologies shared and appreciated by the population, the propaganda war revealed to be a debacle. The shortage of linguistic and traditional features, the weak knowledge of the local mentality, the difficulty to spread the news to provinces and rural areas where most of the people lived, because of technical problems, were fatal elements that caused a net supremacy of the mujahidin. The latter managed to reach the most remote regions, being located already there and, above all, being bearers of a religious Islamic ideology that was already an active constituent of the lives of millions of people. The communism would be never deeply understood by the Afghan civil society, that would remain faithful to its Islamic origins.

3.4 Reasons why propaganda was fundamental for Soviet intervention

As analysed, Soviet propaganda modified during the course of the war; it adapted to the necessities and purposes of the historic moment. The initial logic of the propagandistic diffusion of information was directed towards the justification of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The message that had to be shared was about the demanded and required co-participation of the Soviet Union in Afghan domestic affairs, since, being Afghanistan a new constituted republic, it was still unexperienced. Its northern neighbour would “internationally aid” the DRA to definitively win over the rebels and to stabilise.

²⁵⁹ Fogel', "Особенности пропаганды СССР во время военной акции в Афганистане: 1979-1989 гг." ("Osobennosti propagandy SSSR vo vremja voennoj akzii v Afganistane: 1979-1989 gg."), 27.

Political perception of the Soviet Union within domestic territory, in parallel, was extremely steered by media discourses, by the controlled and selected news; the consciousness of the world became a governmental affair, managed by the high authorities. In perfect Cold War-style, there could not exist shades: the world had to be perceived in black or white. In this specific case, it means that any Soviet internal ideological contradiction had to be nipped in the bud and this would be made possible only by a strict information restraint.²⁶⁰ This was the main explication to the total control the Politburo had over the media since 1979 to 1985. The main target of the information policy implemented by Brezhnev and, consequently, by Soviet censorship, was in the name of a prevention of public discussion concerning the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. It continued to be presented as a civil and contained conflict, where the Soviet involvement was very limited. The spread of the real factual events and the economic and human expenditure the USSR was facing, to afford the war expenses, would not be well appreciated by the population, that, at the time, was dealing with a hard-generalised crisis in the motherland.

Furthermore, a strong and functional propaganda could become useful in the weakening of the enemy, in Soviet Union. The public discrediting could be a lethal weapon, if well employed.

Gradually, from 1986, after the political turning point with the Secretariat of Gorbachev, the propagandistic line followed the political renewal. Propaganda would remain an instrument to hoard the popular benevolence, but in a different way. People had to be informed about the reality of their country and had to feel emotionally involved in any political, social or economic issue that directly concerned the Soviet Union. The Afghan War started to be judged as one of them, having held the implication of the USSR forces already for years.

Therefore, the policy-making background radically changed, Soviet propaganda adjusted, but the principal aims basically remained unchanged. The reasons at the base of Soviet huge dedication to propagandistic functioning could be grouped into two essential subcategories, that are the employment of propaganda to maintain a socio-political internal stability, especially at home, and its being an additional military strategy to attract more followers among the civilians, mainly in Afghanistan. They would be deeper examined in the following paragraphs.

3.4.1 Propaganda: a means of political stability

The Afghan war, especially at the beginning, was not sponsored at all. The Soviet civil population would not be consulted by the leadership in office to take the decision regarding the possibility of invading Afghanistan. The media coverage about the amount of international economic assistance

²⁶⁰ Vladimir G. Krysko, *Секреты психологической войны (Sekrety psihologicheskoy vojni)*, Minsk: Charvest, 1999, 133. Available at: <http://www.lants.ru/books/Политика/Крысько В.Г. - Секреты психологической войны.pdf>.

to DRA would be covered. The military operations in which the Soviet troops were taking active part would not be mentioned and, in some cases, would be denied.

The diffused image of the motherland continued to be a universe of prosperity, social cohesiveness and ideological constancy, without referring to the increasing financial troubles and to the counter-revolutionary, that is anti-communist, sentiments, that began to arise within the Soviet allied states. In this respect, Borovik sarcastically commented in an article that, from what was presented by the press, Afghanistan should have had a sound foundation of socialism and socialist economy, but, at the end of the war, the discovery was that, in Afghanistan, socialism had not put down roots.²⁶¹

The idea that Soviet propaganda had diffused was, in fact, that of a solid Afghan government, where communism became a shared ideology; the truth would be unmasked only during the last years of the war. It was crucial to preserve a domestic unity not to add further concerns to the communist government of the USSR, more concentrated, at that time, over the struggle for international supremacy, rather than over national points.

The refusal to inform the population was a common practice during the Brezhnev era, provided that the whole media apparatus was managed by the authoritarian power. The military preparations to the invasion would be executed in whole secrecy, hiding the truth, both to the Afghan civil society and to the Soviet one, even after the implementation. The Soviet Union as a disinterested defender friend of its neighbours, the Soviet Union as a sympathetic country, only interested in the peaceful cohabitation among peoples, but always in the name of legitimacy.

The support, and even more, the appreciation of the society was the *conditio sine qua non* the whole political system could not survive. Brezhnev and Gorbachev had two opposite views of the social backing. The first, as emerged, was slanted towards the false demonstration of the foolproof methods and intentions of the Soviet Union that, being a communist regime in defence of the working class, gave the priority to the people. Such tenet would be exploited to convince the nation inhabitants about the social motivations leading to a Soviet three-dimensional intervention in Afghanistan, in aid of the needy local people. The latter, conversely, would foster a more transparent policy, including the people. The stability of the society would be researched through a more open and engrossing propaganda, granting the freedom of speech even to the readers of information newspapers. The news would be, for sure, sifted, but they gave the sensation of being cleaner and more realistic. Therefore, the propaganda, even after 1985, would be employed as a means to get the approval of the society. The difference was that, being times changed and being Gorbachev's apparatus not the direct mandator of the Soviet intervention, playing into the complementarity between the heroism of the veterans and the public's plain refusal for the war, he could withdraw the troops, without making regard himself as a loser. The war could end since

²⁶¹Artyom Borovik, "The hidden war", *Life* (February 1988): 100-106.

the “international assistance” had been accomplished, the Afghan armed units and the government had become able to manage the situation and opted for nationally reconciling and, above all, because the society highly claimed it.

3.4.2 Propaganda: an additional military strategy

Psychological influence became a basic requirement for the Soviet military campaign. The option of self-managing the propaganda and the diffusion of all the news became a proper martial strategy. It was directed to the manipulation of the political position and perception the Soviet Union evoked at the three different sides: at international level, at home and in Afghanistan itself. Concerning the first angle, an efficient military propaganda would prevent, in Soviet view, the ideological and ethical domination that would be possibly gained by the United States. Contemporaneously, the absence of western credible reporters, presenting the facts from a different point of view, would keep the Soviet Union in a position of superiority, conferring to its journalists a high grade of legitimacy and truthfulness. The preclusion of the spreading of information regarding the way Soviet Union was acting in Afghanistan was considered overriding, not only for domestic policy, but, above all, at international level. If Soviet occupation would be showed in its completeness, the risk of being held immoral and unacceptable could become concrete, both stimulating the West to take action harder and generating accusations and a reduction of a generalised ideological support.

The morality of Soviet involvement and mediation within the Afghan War had to be secured at any cost. If at home the eminence of a restraining censorship had the value of not stirring the crowd against its Soviet mother country and if, internationally, the strategic target was not to instigate the economic and military supporters of the mujahidin, avoiding a global collision, in Afghanistan the intent was to weaken the Islamic enemies. The propagation of anti-mujahidin leaflets, posters and anecdotes to pick out the negative actions the counter-revolutionaries had taken, killing civilians, destroying places of public interests, was addressed towards a progressive dismantling of the circle of the people backing them.²⁶² Afghan educated urban people were more devoted to the Soviet cause; they were more easily persuadable about the positive outcome the presence of the USSR troops in Kabul would have brought, partly because the Soviet messages were smoothly spread in the capital city, and partly because the rebels with their crude methods paved the way to ethical questionings.

²⁶² Tony Balasevicius and Greg Smith, “Fighting the Mujahideen: Lessons from the Soviet Counter-Insurgency Experience in Afghanistan,” *Canadian Military History* 16, n. 4 (2007): 76, <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol16/iss4/8>.

Therefore, the military strategy of undermining the authority of the mujahidin and of building up a political image of the Soviet Union as a rescuer of Afghanistan brought some results in Kabul and cities, showing its inconclusiveness in the rural zones. Mountain areas were dominated by the rebels and the Soviets did not manage to convert their political position, being considered, until 1989, as illegitimate aggressors.

The Soviet Union developed an actual apparatus responsible for the managing of the propaganda, even constituted by specialists, experts in situ and secret agents, considering it a cardinal segment of the warfare. So, the Soviet-Afghan was a fully-fledged information war, besides being an armed confrontation.

3.5 Conclusion

The Soviet Union of the early 80s was a reality founded on an authoritarian decision-making hierarchy, strictly linked to an inclusive foreign policy that was deemed as a priority.

The preservation of a ranking position at international level and the ideological influence had to be officially recognised, at any cost. The way and most functional means to create the desired political impression was the consolidation of the propaganda network. Both displaying Soviet virtuosity and military flair and calling up the united moral spirit the USSR set aside the fraternal allied Afghanistan would be workable.

The propagandistic choices, in the first period of the war, were directed towards the Soviet leadership's utility, that is the concealing of the substantial expenses the Soviet Union had to go to, in order to carry on the Afghan War. In the eyes of Soviet citizens, as it would be showed after the "opening of the information" about the conflict, only with Gorbachev, the USSR involvement within an improper struggle was a mere and unjustified matter of a political attempt of superiority, bringing no benefits to the *Rodina mat'*, and, on the contrary, causing considerable social and financial damages.

The concession to the people of expressing their conjectures and viewpoints over the war was a further strategy of the propaganda, that, adapting to Gorbachev's era, liberalised the information to move close the society to its belonging land.

To conclude, the importance of the propaganda for the Soviet Union could not be limited to an additional element to win the war; it was an integral part of the war that, from the Soviet side, was fought even in this field. It had always been judged as a feature of social cohesion, of ideological defence, of military strength and, most of all, of political preservation.

Avoiding social domestic challenges, through the appearance of an ongoing prosperous and pacific background, and persuading Afghan society about the friendship and collaboration between the two nations were the initial guiding principles of the "first propaganda", 1979-1985.

Social co-participation within Soviet affairs, through the transmission of a more complete picture of the USSR procedures in place, manifesting to second and humour popular will, giving particular coverage to veterans and to the assessment they deserve, were the foundational standards of the “second propaganda”, 1986-1989.

Different forms of communications to achieve the same purpose, namely to shape a positive, strong and ideal political model of the Soviet Union, that was appreciated and admired by its friends and dreaded and respected by its enemies.

Chapter 4

The Other Side of the Soviet-Afghan Informative War

The Soviet-Afghan War, independently from the singular perceptions attributed to it, concluded with the complete withdrawal of the Soviet troops in February 1989.

Gorbachev's efforts were addressed towards the manifestation of the accomplishment of the international duty the Soviet Union had assumed under Brezhnev's leadership and, thus, the political perception he was interested in evoking claimed the victory of the Soviet troops. In his view, the Soviet army managed to guarantee the Afghan independence from the rebels and to ensure to the DRA the sufficient autonomy and strength to call for a national reconciliation, handling the mujahidin.

Therefore, while for the Soviet Union and for the correlated propagandistic network, the war in Afghanistan was a great success, internationally, the perspective changed. The United States, backing the Islamic mujahidin in their fight against the communist regime, recognised in the Soviet withdrawal a weakening of the USSR worldwide position and an important failure of the ideological and military schemes of the Soviet intentions.

Furthermore, the consequences of the Soviet-Afghan War would not be limited to the specific case, but they would become more generalised. Two years after the retreat, the Soviet Union would collapse. In 1991, it would dissolve and split within self-governed and independent republics.

Afghanistan and the military involvement of the USSR co-participated in the following undermining of the unity of the Soviet Union in its ideological and political completeness, causing damage to its economy and social cohesiveness.

Therefore, if the direct cause of the Soviet division was not the Afghan war and the carried-out result, perceived as a victory or as a defeat, mattering of perspectives, it, however, played a fundamental role, whose repercussions would bring to 1991.

4.1 Foreign political perception of the Soviet intervention

The foreign perception about the Soviet-Afghan War did not necessarily coincide with the Soviet grasp of the subject and, especially, with its information warfare and censorship's guideline.

The absence of communication and control systems within Afghanistan made the reporting of the events very defective and easily alterable. The means employed by the mujahidin to spread the news were rudimentary, the information was orally diffused from camels and motorbikes and could be deprived or enriched by extra details.

The network of their propaganda, in spite of the scarceness of developed means of communications and messages, resulted to be quite effective and well-organised in its anti-Soviet purpose. The huge presence of mujahidin in the mountainous and rural areas favoured the transmission of verbal bulletins among the population and the distance of the latter from the capital allowed the handling of the information concerning the ruinous Soviet trend in the war. The mujahidin were the primary source of re-distribution of information, since their reports extended to Pakistan, where they were acquired by the Western correspondents.

For the entire duration of the war, only a small number of press centres in the city of Peshawar could be considered a confirmed reporter for the international press. Peshawar was at the Pakistani frontier link to Afghanistan, whose importance consisted in its acting as a stronghold for the rebels, and in its employment for the sorting of weapons for the mujahidin and for the positioning of the Pakistani intelligence. Among the aforementioned centres, one of the most representative ones for the Western correspondents was the Afghan Documentation Center (ADC), whose head was Sayed Bahaudin Majrouh, until his murder in 1988. Since 1980, the ADC released a monthly bulletin regarding news about Afghanistan, that was highly taken into account by Western reporters. Another main source to provide information concerning the development of the war, was the Afghan Media Resource Centre (AMRC) that, from 1985, was affiliated to the Boston University, relating material over the ongoing Afghan guerrillas. Furthermore, there were two other Western affiliated Pakistani nucleuses of spreading information: the Afghan Information and Documentation Center (AIDC) and the Writers' Union for Free Afghanistan (WUFA) that perseverated to proof their lack of affiliation with the mujahidin.

The mujahidin, in fact, very often distorted the reality of the situation. Their leaders' aim was to impress their domestic public and to inspire their fighting units, persuading the audience that the war was yielding good results. In particular, their fake news was addressed towards a huge increasing of the total number of killed Soviet soldiers and a net decreasing of the 90,000 Afghan state troops to 40,000. The mujahidin's news firmly asserted that more than the 90% of the whole Afghan territory was controlled by themselves; the principal objective was to influence the foreign, mainly American, support to their rebellion. Besides being manipulated, its news, frequently, became outdated by the time it was acknowledged in Peshawar, losing even more credibility. Nevertheless, the mujahidin's messages remained the primary source of information, even for the Western press. From July 1983 to March 1988, the international Associate Press (AP) gave media coverage to the Afghan War, basing on 443 stories coming from Islamabad. The United Press International (UPI) did the same, collecting information from 92 Pakistani reports.²⁶³ Therefore,

²⁶³ Ali T. Sheik, "Not the Whole Truth: Soviet and Western Media Coverage of the Afghan Conflict," *Conflict Quarterly* (Fall 1990): 74.

the international Western press was largely influenced by the internal Afghan counter-revolutionary view, since the mujahidin succeeded in diffusing their exposures through Pakistan, the linking contact point between Afghanistan and the West.

The major foreign press agencies were constrained to rely upon the diplomatic forces in Pakistan, who were informed by the mujahidin themselves. As a consequence, the coverage over the war in Afghanistan lacked in truthfulness. Western newspapers began to lose their interest towards the diffusion of news concerning that concealed war and drastically reduced the amount of their journalists assigned to the Afghan topic. In this regard, the English *BBC*, owned only a correspondent covering both Afghanistan and Pakistan; only the *New York Times* had a full-time reporter to write exclusively about Afghanistan.²⁶⁴

Dissatisfaction among Western media agencies arose, and many reporters attempted to personally report from Kabul. For international Western correspondents was very arduous to personally go to the capital city, even because of Soviet threats. In 1980 all the journalists from the West were expelled from Afghanistan and visas were not granted to them anymore, behind a corporate agreement between the DRA and the Soviet Union. In addition, on October 5, 1984, the Soviet ambassador in Pakistan, Vitaly Smirnov, told to the Agence France Press that any foreign reporter, travelling through Afghanistan, would be imprisoned or killed.²⁶⁵ The intimidation by the Soviet Union was directed to the manipulation of the media coverage, in order to inhibit the Western press to get hold of information that, being published, could have undermined the authority of Soviet press. Smirnov's statement was not officially criticised neither by the United States, but the communication reached the entire world. Several reporters in situ were captured by the Soviets or Afghans and accused of espionage, the most fortunate managed to run into rebel groups and travelled with them. News from the inside could be provided but presented its own limitations.

The shortage of freedom of movement for the journalists was a primary restriction. It was dangerous travelling alone and, most of times, the mujahidin partially showed the actual guerrillas to their "hosts". The perceived image of the fighting units was a positive one, which tried to convince the West about the nobility of their cause. The resulting media coverage was an ennoblement, in quasi-romantic tones, of the *jihād*, that was a term employed by the mujahidin themselves to elevate their counter-communist revolutionary struggle.

The chosen written lexicon, copied from the Afghan rebels, had its relevance for the contextual publishing, presenting connotations with the religious field. Therefore, unintentionally and commonly, Western media incurred the disapprobation of other Islamic countries, such as Iran.

²⁶⁴ Julian Gearing, "Western media coverage of the war in Afghanistan," *Free Afghanistan*, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 12.

²⁶⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldier of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008), 10.

The resulting headlines were dedicated to the dangerous Soviet expansionistic aim and the criminal offences perpetrated against the brave mujahidin, defending their liberty and autonomy from the destructive communist ideology, striving for the eradication of Islam and of local centuries-old traditions. The Afghan war was transformed, by the Western bloc, into a kind of loophole to discredit the Soviet Union, including it within the larger context of the Cold War. This was the principal reason that converted the articles published by important international press agencies, located in the west side of the globe, into digressions on the astonishing motives at the base of the mujahidin's behaviour. The desired goal of the West was to blame the East, making the press a functional means to convince the masses.

The reliability of the information was doubtful, especially during the pre-Gorbachev period, when Western reporters could not make contact with Soviet and Afghan diplomats in the region of Peshawar and neither in Kabul. Hence, the news was almost all similar and presented no journalistic scoop. As a consequence, a common practice of embellishing the rumours spread from the United States. Casualties caused by the Soviet Union and by the Afghan government were glorified, the cruelty of the Soviet-Afghans was amplified, in order to show the human side of the rebels. The result was a superficiality of the media reports that was workable for the primary aim of the struggle against communism

4.1.1 Mujahidin's anti-Soviet propaganda

The mujahidin met the challenge of the propagandistic war of information pursued by the Soviet Union and, during the ten years of fighting, regularly published and distributed anti-Soviet propagandistic messages. A sort of underground propaganda was the achieved result, heiling the greatness of Allah and of the Islamic religion. The subversive advertising consisted in the dissemination of a huge number of pamphlets inviting the people to take up the cause against the Soviet invaders in the name of religious independence and of the safeguard of their autonomous existence. An example of an insurrectionary leaflet presented the text: "God's will is our goal, the prophet Muhammad is our leader, the Koran is our law, the jihad is our path, death for faith is our great goal, freedom is our existence, shame is our forgiveness!"

The content of the widespread flyers among the rural population lied on the summoning of anti-communist sentiments and the support to the Islamic war, following Allah's willingness. The ease of building up analytical texts that would be intelligible to the cultivated population relied on the sharing of the spoken language, differently from the one the Soviets spoke. The diffused idea was the accusation against the Afghan government of the DRA, that did not respond to Allah for its actions and did not serve its compatriots, but it was a political figurehead of the Soviet Union.

The urgent invitation of the Islamic fighters was the destruction of the infidels, firstly of the Soviet foreigners and, subsequently, of the Soviets' henchmen, that is the communist Afghans.

Although written passages were employed and quite impressive, the principal means of communicative diffusion for propagandistic purposes consisted in the dispersal of images and posters, depicting Soviet submission to Islam. A fitting case is a leaflet in black and white representing a figure half-bear and half-devil, symbolising the Soviet Union, nicked by a Muslim's sword. Another one illustrated the DRA leader, Babrak Karmal, dancing to the sound of a Soviet tambourine. Karmal was represented even as a puppet whose strings were tied to a hammer and sickle: the eloquence of the drew message was meaningful and accusatorial against the puppet government of Afghanistan. The comics were comprehensible by every Afghan inhabitant and they were very impactful.²⁶⁶



Fig. 4. “We want you”, from Andrew Charlton-Jones, *Soviet Afghan War Mujahideen Propaganda*, December 6, 2016.

On the left (Fig. 4), the figure represents a piece of mujahidin's propaganda diffused during the 1980s, at the height of the war against the Soviets.

The intrinsic words evoked by the picture as a sort of encouragement to Afghan civilians to co-participate in the liberation of Afghanistan from the enemies. The Soviets are depicted as a red skinned bear, lying defenceless. USSR invaders were portrayed as weak losers, rather than as fierce and bloodthirsty. It could be even a way to reassure the people about the forthcoming Islamic ascendancy over the invaders.

Anti-Soviet propaganda was organised in a hierarchical structuration; over the Afghan territory there was the presence of a large number of scattered centres around independent organisations and groups, individually managing the spreading of indoctrinating materials. The duties of each

²⁶⁶ Fogel', “Особенности пропаганды СССР во время военной акции в Афганистане: 1979-1989 гг”, 23-24.

single structure were the design, the publication and distribution of the informative works, such as articles, brochures, posters, magazines and proclamations. They were even the responsible for the coordination of public meetings and conversations, for the profusion of false rumours regarding the Soviet troops, for the fomentation of anti-communist government protests and popular agitations. The objective of mujahidin's social appearances was directed towards the attraction of further members to the propagandistic networks, even meaning more rivals for the Soviets, that would lose consensus among the community.

Authorities of the government in power had to be discredited in the eyes of the Afghan natives, being judged as illegitimate and defender of an ideology – the communist one – that was not related to the centenarian traditions and roots of the country, differently from the Islam, that was the fundament of Afghanistan and its people.

The mujahidin diffused many periodicals to strengthen their propaganda in several languages. Besides the principal national languages, that were Pashto and Dari, they translated their articles even in English, as to make them understandable by the United States and Western media more in general, in Russian, Urdu and Arabic. Around 17 magazines and 30 newspapers released by the mujahidin circulated in the countries of Iran, India and Pakistan, that, as mentioned above, was the strategic point of contact between the Afghan rebels and Western supportive powers.

“Voice of the Holy Warriors” was one among them, since it was the official newspaper of the Jamiat-e Islami Islamic party, whose editor became Abd-al Hafiz Mansur. He wrote against the Soviet offensive in the Panjshir Valley in 1980, denouncing the Soviets for having bombed several residential buildings and for having killed 40 civilians of a single village. In the village of Haji, 32 other inhabitants were shot, without considering if they were women, old people or children; in the village of Nolic blamed Soviet atrocities reached their peak, since houses were incinerated with whole families inside; in the village of Abdasa, the Soviets even killed all the pets they met on their path.²⁶⁷

Very often the publications reported interviews with active combatant of the jihad, blaming the Soviets for their violent attacks against innocents. The underlying theme was the condemnation of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul, its disinterest towards the rural population, the invective against the obtrusiveness of the USSR and the bravery and solidarity of the so called “freedom fighters”. The final target of the series of propagandistic pieces was the mobilisation of the masses

²⁶⁷ Sergey E. Grigorev, *Панджшер в 1975–1990 гг. глазами афганского историка (Pandzhsher v 1975–1990 gg. glazami afganskogo istorika)* (St. Petersburg: SPbGU, 1997), 42-43.

and their recruiting. In the name of Islam, the Muslim brotherhood had to be honoured and made mandatory, and the emulation of “freedom fighters” in their jihad had to be fulfilled.²⁶⁸

Therefore, while the subjects of propaganda were much similar to those of Soviet proselytism, and the addressees were the same, that is the civil society of Afghanistan, the huge gap concerned the individuals of the reciprocal charges that were antithetical.

Mujahidin’s information, many times, were false, especially when concerning the outcome of military operations and the losses of Soviet and Afghan troops, that were overestimated relative to those of Islamic fighters.²⁶⁹ Abd-al Hafiz Mansur himself was an advocate of this kind of writing. Reporting about the Soviet casualties during the battles in the valley of Panjer, he uttered that the mujahidin, on October 15, 1981, managed to shoot down an adverse helicopter, murdering 100 Soviet soldiers and losing only 10 civilians and 2 soldiers; in the attack of April 15, 1982 the rebels destroyed 14 helicopters, 2 jets, 60 tracks and killed 1,500 soldiers; in the sixth Soviet attack in the valley, the “freedom fighters” sabotaged 74 aircrafts and 1,676 tanks, killing more than 8,600 USSR soldiers.²⁷⁰ The implausibility of the reports was not influential, since the final aim was to persuade the Afghan civilians about the moral and military superiority of the Islamic combatants, as to convince further people to actively join the cause, certain of the victory.

Another pattern of “Islamic propaganda” was the visual agitation. Many cases of mujahidin killing the Afghan population under the guise of Soviet servicemen happened. They wore Soviet uniforms to cause a strong psychological impact over the people, increasing their fear and hatred for the USSR.²⁷¹ They robbed, murdered and destroyed Afghan villages, only in order to undermine the Soviet position in the country.

Immediately after the Soviet intrusion in Afghanistan, among the Afghan counter-revolutionaries a singular literary genre developed: the heroic poetry. The lines of the poems were dedicated to the pains and sufferings Afghan inhabitants were compelled to endure, that were the direct consequences of the foreign invasion, linked to aggressive criminality and moralistic depravity. They mentioned the need of revenge for all the Afghan deaths, calling everyone to arms, even children about to become adults, and ensuring the readers about the indisputable bright future, since the victory was the unique Muslims’ destiny.

²⁶⁸ Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), XX-XI.

²⁶⁹ Marianna R. Arunova, “Антисоветская пропаганда исламской контрреволюции Афганистана” (“Antisovetskaya propaganda islamskoj kontrrevolyucii Afganistana”), in *Воинствующий ислам и меры противодействия его влиянию (Voinstvuyushchij islam i mery protivodejstviya ego vliyaniyu)*, ed. Rudolph G. Yanovskogo (Moscow: Akademiya obshchestvennyh nauk pri CK KPSS, 1988), 105.

²⁷⁰ Grigorev, *Панджшер в 1975–1990 гг. глазами афганского историка*, 99.

²⁷¹ Valentin I. Varennikov, *Неповторимое...: в 7 т. (Nepovtorimoe...: v 7 t.)* (Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel’, 2001), vol.5, 448.

Halilulla Khaili was one of the most operative poets during the war. He joined the mujahidin and supported the fight with his poetry addressed towards the magnificence of the jihad and against the Soviet infidels.²⁷²

Besides the print and visual propagandistic instruments, mujahidin employed even the radio as a means to spread their undermining messages against the Soviet intrusion. Radio broadcasts were 50 times higher during the war; they were promulgated in local national languages and, furthermore, in Uzbek and Farsi too. The technological support to the Afghan rebels was provided by the neighbouring Pakistan that ensured them almost four radio channels to publicly demand national liberation and to justify mujahidin's massacre of the enemies, since it was extremely necessary to free their country.

The coordination of the several fighting groups was very hard, since they were shifted within distinct, and often, divergent resistance factions controlling more than 90 separate provincial zones in Afghanistan. Consequently, propaganda characteristics varied depending upon the faction. Pashtun traditionalists aimed at circulating the belief that every Afghan human being had to recognise, since the birth, the value of a life lived taking up arms; whereas, followers of conventional fighting approach, pointed at convincing the masses about the necessity of learning how to combat, being the Afghan people not "born belligerents".

Individualism and the lack of unified tenets led to indiscipline and to uncoordinated decision-makings, detrimental to propagandistic and even strictly military goals. In this intricate situation, the role of Pakistan was extended to improve collaboration and systematisation among the Islamic wings, generally favouring the most extremist ones.²⁷³ Since 1982, the mandate sent to the CIA station in Pakistan was clear and stated to "make the Soviets bleed". Pakistani leader, General Zia-Al-Haq indoctrinated the Inter-Services Intelligence, that is the Pakistani ISI, to grab the controls and hardly sustain the anti-Soviet campaign promoted by mujahidin, on all fronts. Politically, the ISI granted its support to the Peshawar Seven, that were the seven Afghan mujahidin's political parties, that would function as a linkage with the Islamic men on the battlefield.²⁷⁴

Political backup of the neighbour Pakistan was completed by the substantial bearing it received through the high airing of TV shows providing relevance to Afghan mujahidin political figures and leaders, that exceeded Afghan national programs seven times. The telecasts concerned documentaries about the mujahidin's operations against the Soviets and Afghan regular troops,

²⁷² Grigorev, *Панджшер в 1975–1990 гг. глазами афганского историка*, 92-93.

²⁷³ John Pike, "Anti-Soviet Mujahideen," *Global Security*, August 18, 2012.

²⁷⁴ The bearing to the political parties by the ISI was based on a proportional mechanism, the more efficacious were the affiliated commanders in the field, more weapons were given to their party of reference. Furthermore, since 1984, fighting within the anti-Soviet jihad required the official registration to one of the seven approved parties. See: Sean M. Maloney, *Enduring the Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, Inc., 2014), 9-10.

public readings of the Koran, religious sermons and prayers, with the objective of reasserting the Islamic cause and principles.

Therefore, the anti-Soviet propaganda, in all its forms, revealed to be effective in the achievement of its goals. The mujahidin, in fact, by controlling provincial areas of Afghanistan, that were even the more populated, could reach each inhabitant, from the youngest to the eldest, from the most cultivated to the wholly uncultivated. Furthermore, Islam was a prerogative within the whole country and was a deep-seated element of Afghan traditional culture, differently from communist ideology that had been forcibly introduced in a territory where the expressions “class struggle” and “working class revolution” meant absolutely nothing, being mainly populated by religious rural people.

4.1.2 American coverage of anti-Soviet propaganda

Since the beginning of the Soviet-Afghan War, the United States were interested in the annihilation of the Soviet public image, pointing at conduction of a parallel propaganda that would involve a broader thematic background, attributable to the ongoing ideological Cold War between the two superpowers. Already on February 7, 1980, President Carter spoke at the White House, in front of the representatives of the faculty of Islamic studies, in favour of the Afghan rebels, stressing the nobility of fighting for freedom. His successor, Ronald Reagan, even more openly supported the mujahidin, alleging the tyranny of the Soviet Union. He attempted to justify its invasion in Afghanistan through the infamous “Brezhnev Doctrine”, implying that “once a country has fallen into the darkness of communism, it would not be allowed to see the light of freedom anymore”.²⁷⁵ The United States considered, and tried to internationally make consider, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan as a limitation of the Soviet authority. Being unable to politically preserve the DRA communist government, Moscow decreed that a military display of power would be functional. The Soviet empire was showing the first signs of collapse and the US were highly motivated to accelerate the process, preventing any possible further ideological influence over Third World countries. The global balance had to be safeguarded. The United States feared an eventual consequent control of the Asian sub-continent by the Soviet Union that, once gained the full domination over Afghanistan, would obtain an overland passage to the Indian Ocean.²⁷⁶

This was basically the main reason that pushed the United States to publicly blame the Soviet Union for having attacked not only Afghanistan, but even the United States themselves, mining to

²⁷⁵ Ronald Reagan, “Выступление на ежегодной конференции консервативного комитета политического действия,” Вашингтон, округ Колумбия, 1 марта 1985 г, *Откровенно говоря* (Vystuplenie na ezhegodnoj konferencii konservativnogo komiteta politicheskogo dejstviya,” Vashington, okrug Kolumbiya, 1 marta 1985 g, *Otrkovenno govorya*) (Moscow: Novosti, 1990), 254-255.

²⁷⁶ United States Defense Intelligence Agency, “Intelligence Commentary”, January 7, 1980.

their vital business and affairs. On January 23, 1980, Carter warned the Soviet Union straight and directly about the consequences of the USSR invasive assault in Kabul, stating that any expansionary aims over the area surrounding the Persian Gulf would be judged as a slight to the US and that would be opposed on every field.²⁷⁷ Propaganda war was part of the generalised counter-attack against the Soviet Union.

The first step the United States were addressed to consisted in the demonstration of the illegitimacy of the Soviet introduction of the OKSV within Afghan soil, taxing them with several violations of human rights in front of the Commission of war crimes in Afghanistan.

The first accusations against the USSR were moved by the US already in 1980, concerning the inhuman employment of chemical weapons against the Afghan civilian population and Islamic rebels.²⁷⁸ From November 1980 to January 1981 a series of articles, showing devastated war scenes from the battlefield in Afghanistan due to the employment of chemical grenades made by Soviets, appeared on the American magazine "Counterspy". Similar recriminations continued for the whole length of the war and news regarding the barbarism and atrocity of the arms chosen by the Soviet Union kept on being published to discredit the US arch enemy.

American propaganda had a very extensive echo among Western countries, and its initiatives were, in fact, suddenly implemented. It is the case of the announcement by the President Reagan on January 6, 1982, of the, so called, "Day of Afghanistan", that would be established on March 21 and celebrated until 1988.

Between 1982 and 1984, the United States produced several films of propagandistic nature, whose main subject was the noble struggle of the Afghan armed opposition to defeat the vile Soviet troops. The United States Information Agency (USIA), in two years, released three documentaries regarding the Afghan rebels; the titles were "Afghanistan – 1982: the struggle for freedom does not stop", "Afghanistan: the secret war" and "We are Afghanistan".²⁷⁹ USIA administrated the propaganda network and instructed the US international multimedia agency, the Voice Of America (VOA), not to employ the designations "rebels" or "anti-government guerrillas" to refer to the Afghan situation and mujahidin, but to prefer terms as "patriots", "freedom fighters" and "nationalists" in order to emphasise the positive value of their involvement. While VOA broadcasted about the war and briefings to journalists, USIA organised conferences and congresses to discuss about Afghanistan, opening them to the public. The United States trained the mujahidin

²⁷⁷ "Carter Would Fight for Persian Gulf; Seeks to Resume Draft Registration," *The Washington Post*, January 24, 1980.

²⁷⁸ Jimmy Carter, "American course in a changing world," *Department of State Bulletin* 80, no. 2038 (1980), 3-6.

²⁷⁹ Oleg A. Alyakrinskij, *Внешнеполитическая пропаганда в США в 1980-е годы (Vneshnepoliticheskaya propaganda v SSHA v 1980-e gody)* (Moscow: In-t SSHA i Kanady, 1988), 115.

in Peshawar as reporters and photographers, in order to guide them in their personal global distribution of the Afghan news.

The newspaper *The Washington Post*, in 1984, declared that the struggle for freedom in Afghanistan was “an awesome spectacle” and that would deserve “a generous tribute”; two years later, the *Los Angeles Times* would affirm that the Afghan guerrillas were largely admired by the Americans, that would ensure their political support and prudent military backing to sustain their just cause in the name of liberty.²⁸⁰

In 1984, the Helsinki Human Rights Organisation released a report, providing statistics, data and figures of the Soviet victims, to evidence the use of torture by the USSR soldiers against Afghan civilians, the employment of mines in popular villages, including booby-traps and hidden mines that had been explicitly prohibited in the Geneva Conference, already in 1954.²⁸¹

The West-German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, embraced the initiative and, together with the United States, openly accused the Soviet Union not to stop the occupation of Afghanistan, continuing to feed the carnage.²⁸²

The Soviet involvement in the Afghan war worsened the relationship with the United States, and, more in general, had a negative impact over the international situation, that would be exploited by the US themselves to strengthen their anti-Soviet propaganda. The most popular topics would be Soviet utilisation of chemical weapons, their unjustifiable bombings of civilian villages, the aviation and the continuous violations of the established fundamental human rights.

The propaganda system of the United States would work on a large scale. It was an example of secret diplomacy that, benefitting from the support of the secret services, both American and Pakistani, would cause several damages to the Soviet Union. The American embassy in Islamabad held weekly meetings, that in reality were briefing sessions to analyse the telegraphic information regarding the situation in Kabul and the military evolutions. The head of the briefings was a middle-rank official that reported to the participants information concerning any change in the DRA government or episodes in Afghan cities. The importance of this kind of meeting resided in the proving of news, coming from the internal mujahidin faction of the Afghan war, to the US and the conversion of them into journalistic scoops already on the following day. Before their publication, in Washington, the news was very often enriched with details and autobiographical considerations by decision-makers, in order to give more coverage even to the CIA's operation in

²⁸⁰ Jacqueline Fitzgibbon, “Justifying Jihad: US politics, propaganda and the Afghan Mujahedeen, 1979-1989,” Cork: School of History UCC, 2011, 63.

²⁸¹ “A report from Helsinki watch. Tears, blood and criers. Human rights in Afghanistan since the invasion.” N.- Y., 1984, 210.

²⁸² “Хроника советско-американских отношений, ч.6” (“Hronika sovetsko-amerikanskih otnoshenij, ch.6”), (Moscow: 1983), 174.

Afghanistan. The themes were always similar, first of all the sensationalism of the mujahidin's courage, but the diversification of sources, coming directly from infiltrated reporters among the insurgents' ranks or from Pakistan, made American media apparently more reliable than the Soviet ones and worthy of being believed mainly by the West.

The discrediting of the Soviet Union intrusiveness in Afghanistan by the United States was prosecuted even by the denial of information released by the USSR. In this regard, American journalists reasserted many times in their articles that the Soviet press did not make available verified materials and data about the USSR intervention in Afghanistan, differently from the way the United States acted during the Vietnam War. The accusation was addressed against the Soviet General Secretary at the time, Brezhnev, and against the decision to hide to his people the actual operations the Soviet Union was acting in and around Kabul. The United States were interested in publicly disproving singular Soviet media, reporting no news concerning the official recognition of the USSR active role in the Afghan struggle.²⁸³

Probably, in the American view, the Soviet fear of frankly reporting the progress of the war depended upon the hidden reason at the base of the sentence to invade, that is the stop of the spread of Islamic jihadist thoughts in the Islamic states of Soviet Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan. The American press *U.S. News & World Reports*, on January 14, 1980 published an article stating that the Kremlin chose to invade Afghanistan with the target of supporting and strengthening the communist regime, fearing that an eventual victory of the Islamic counter-revolutionaries would generate a chain reaction, able to strongly influence the millions of Muslims living in Central Asia, persuading them to arise anti-communist claims.²⁸⁴

The diffusion of Islamic demands and pro-jihad ideas was part of the secret operation the CIA implemented between 1981 and 1988, being backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. During the second half of the 1980s, Islamic anti-communist literature and heroic poetry started to be smuggled in Soviet Central Asian republics; radio shows began to be broadcasted by Pakistan, or directly from opponents in Afghanistan proclaiming anti-communist and pro-religious messages. The purpose to be achieved was the breakout of ideological and ethnical similarities between the Uzbeks, Turkmens, Tajiks, many of whom were sent to fight in the Soviet Muslim battalion, and the Muslim Afghans themselves, that they were forced to kill in their own motherland.²⁸⁵

Therefore, to summarise, American propaganda was developed on several fronts. Its effectiveness derived from the huge and intricate network of sources that were mainly localised in Pakistan.

²⁸³ Anatolij E. Taras, *Методы и приемы психологической войны* (Metody i priemy psihologicheskoy vojny) (Minsk: Harvest, 2006), 352.

²⁸⁴ "Biggest Shock Yet," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 14, 1980.

²⁸⁵ Taisiya V. Rabush, "Джихад и пропаганда в афганском вооруженном конфликте: 1979–1989 гг." ("Djihad i propagandiskom vooruzhennom konflikte: 1979-1989 gg."), *Islamovednie* 7, no. 3 (2016), 23.

The defence of the Islamic cause and the glorification of the mujahidin's jihad revealed to be a successful theme of persuasion to coax the Muslims, around the world, to support their Afghan brothers. Thus, the Soviet Union would be portrayed as a brutal invader, forcing a country, founded on an ancient Islamic tradition, like Afghanistan was, to convert to communism. The worst aspect, highlighted by the United States to promote a more globalised anti-Soviet sentiment, was the employment by the USSR of chemical weapons, that had been explicitly avoided by consensus almost thirty years earlier. The Western bloc would second the United States in their informative battle and so did many Muslim inhabitants of Soviet countries. The USSR would lose a great percentage of followers and, in this respect, social discontent would be one of the principal consequences of the secret war it fought in Afghanistan.

4.2 Modern political perception of the Soviet-Afghan War

As found in previous paragraphs, the Soviet-Afghan War was transformed into a preeminent subject of public interest already during its development. Such trend persisted even after the war ended.

In modern literature, the retrospective analysis of past dramatic events influences the geopolitical vision of the world and, in this regard, the struggle in Afghanistan made its mark. The deriving political perception underwent a metamorphosis over the years and the resulting narration of the facts came in different forms and perceptive outcomes.

The evolution of the writings dedicated to the Afghan war was rapid and turbulent. It happened in almost ten years and was primary due to the radical political reversal with Gorbachev's transparency. The immediate aftermath was a literature full of resentment and encouragement to the baring of traumas caused by the war itself, determining three distinct stages. The first phase dates back to 1987, when informative forms of fiction reached a more subjective level, giving an input for a personal style of writing destined to the apotheoses of the Soviet involuntary soldiers. Lyric poetry and heroic narrative survived until 1989, when they were replaced by the two aforementioned stages that overlapped and co-survived, consisting in the evolutive *publitsistika*, that is the publicist and propagandistic genre, and the reformist liberal reinterpreting of the ongoing Afghan firefight, especially visible in modern poetries and novels.

The press literature, or rather the non-fictional genre, was the one that presented more drastic changes during the course of the years, contemporaneous and following to the war. The Afghan war would be dealt with in a non-objective manner, guaranteeing enough space to veterans and their emotional tales and to public criticism against the antecedent press coverage and against the foreign policy statements taken by the USSR leadership. Thus, the main metamorphosis would be

recognisable in the providing of opportunity to freely express one's own sentiment concerning what happened.

However, the most considerable and voluminous amount of Soviet written publications belonged to the fiction genre, that largely bloomed after the retirement of the military forces of the USSR.

The appellative "new military prose" began to be attributed by Igor Suchich, since 1989, to the literary texts regarding the period of the Afghan war. The impression coming from the prose flourished during the years of the war reflected the oddity and shortage of knowledge about the features of the fights; the critic Aleksandr Ageev, in 1991, defined the war in Afghanistan as an "unhealed wound of the near history", presenting many shortcomings and half-truths, being an insult both against the dead men and the survivors.²⁸⁶ After 1990, the censorship regarding the war definitively ceased; a Soviet correspondent for *Pravda*, named Vladimir Verstakov, for the first time, confirmed that reporters were not allowed to openly draft about the bloody conflict and were forced to oversimplify the events. Verstakov had published a sort of diary in 1983, in the middle of the war, and he would remake it some years later, in 1991, modifying the dramatic tone and accentuating the tragic nature of the war that had made him lose a son.²⁸⁷

Several writings released during the war years and having as main topic the development of the war itself would be revised and reworked, in order to make them more personal, pointing out the most awful aspects of the "covered" Soviet military offensive.

A further example is the English-translated "Russian Roulette: Afghanistan Through Russian Eyes", 1990, by Gennady Bocharov, that was the broaden and more elaborate adaptation of "Byl i videl: Afganistan, 1986 god", whose English translation is "I was and saw: Afghanistan, year 1986", released in 1987. The principal character was a camera operator, previously depicted as a courageous hero, braving the flames to record and report news from the Afghan battlefield:²⁸⁸ in the second version of the story, he would be represented as a false and hypocrite figure, showing an incomplete and steered overview of the actual state of war.²⁸⁹ The author clearly referred to the media blackout of the early '80s and to the forced submission of the Soviet reporters.

The tendencies followed by the Soviet literature reporting about the war period and fights in Afghanistan, arisen after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, could be distinguished in two antithetical sub-categories, addressed towards the unmasking of all the abuses and crimes committed by Soviet troops against the Afghan civilians or towards the conservatism, glorifying veterans and evoking

²⁸⁶ Aleksandr Ageev, "Бесконечное возвращение" ("Beskonechnoe vozvrashchenie"), *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, no.10 (1991), 42.

²⁸⁷ Viktor Verstakov, *Афганский дневник (Afganskij dnevnik)* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1991), 5, 119.

²⁸⁸ Bocharov N. Gennadij, *Был и видел...: Афганистан, 1986 год (Byl i videl...: Afganistan, 1986 god)* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1987), 29.

²⁸⁹ Bocharov N. Gennadij, *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan Through Russian Eyes* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 169.

patriotic feelings. The guilty conscience even emerged. Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, a literary critic, advanced the hypothesis that the society had a sort of obligation to give visibility to pieces of literature, independently from their actual aesthetic quality, just in order to show an interest to works pointed at concretising popular complaints with respect to the lack of information they were subjected on.²⁹⁰

Aleksandr Prochanov is an author that could be mentioned as an additional example to underline the relevance the Afghan events had in printed literature. His novel, “Son o Kabule”, meaning in English “Dream about Kabul”, is the 2001-remake of his own novel “Derevo v zentre Kabula”, “A tree in the centre of Kabul”, of 1982. The protagonist of the tale, being his alter-ego, becomes a powerless passive participant in the events in Kabul.²⁹¹ The progression of the war is showed as an unstoppable external force, driven by the involved powers, the ex-Soviet Union and the United States, deciding for the world future. The features to be underlined, and that, extensively, were typical of the prose linked to Afghanistan and the ten-year war, comprehended the exposure of the contradictions of the historic military events and their representation through the daily lives and behaviours of the characters, that played a three-dimensional active role, having been direct viewers. The materialisation of their points of view became a literary trick to denounce the countless silences of previous years, belonging to those who were forcibly involved within the war.

Mikhail Evstafiev’s novel, “V dvuch shagach ot raya”, whose translation means “Two steps from paradise”, gained the appellation of “nastoyashij russkij”, that is true Russian, for the plausibility and verisimilitude of the characters and their psychological verified attitudes, digging deeper into the most personal thoughts of a man with the war in the heart. The protagonist was the lieutenant Sharagin that served in Afghanistan with the hope of remaining alive for his wife, his children and parents. He was involuntarily sent to perform the “international duty” and, loving his Soviet motherland, he fought convinced that the latter would never betray him. His conviction would die with him.²⁹² The creation of a living text, enhancing the cognitive and emotional pains and misery of the Soviet soldiers, was highly appreciated by the critics and by the Russian public, since it became a quasi-moral redemption for the mistakes attributed to the Soviet Union and for a war whose facts had been finally assessed, after a series of political lies.

In the 2000s, the Afghan war even became a preferential inspirational theme for novels of mystery genre. An example is “Spasti posolstvo”, in English, “Save the Embassy”, by Danil Korezkij, released in 2014. It is the story of a secret operation of airborne troops and crews of military

²⁹⁰ Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, “О чем думает «саперная лопатка»?” (O chem dumaet sapernaya lopatka?), *Znamya* 5 (1990): 21.

²⁹¹ Aleksandr Prochanov, *Сон о Кабуле (Son o Kabule)* (Moscow: Armada-press, 2002).

²⁹² Mikhail Evstafiev, *В двух шагах от рая (V dvuch shagach ot raya)* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006).

aircraft, set at the time of the combat, finalised to move the Russian Embassy from Kabul, after it had been captured by the mujahidin.²⁹³

In recent years, the notoriety and importance gained by the Soviet-Afghan War did not end. On the contrary its more rooted consciousness seemed to become a necessary and essential step to supply a precise outline of the present. Russian writers continued to increase the focus on the theme of the Afghan struggle of 1979, as to delineate a comprehensive political and ethnical awareness of the story, that could be indicated as a major cause of the generational problems faced by the Soviet Union mainly after its split.

Concomitantly with fiction texts, many leaders who have experienced the Afghan combat dedicated themselves to the writing of manuscripts, “non-fiction” works reporting in detail the military events in the country. An exemplification is General Aleksandr Liakhovskij and his work “Tragediya i loblest’ Afganistana”, “The tragedy and valour of Afghanistan”, that was reprinted in three different editions dating 1995, 2004 and 2009. It has become a sort of military encyclopaedia chronologically telling concrete facts. General Viktor Mirimskij published his memoirs too in 2006 under the collection “Zagadki Afganskoj Vojny”, “The mysteries of the Afghan war”, claiming that the full picture of the Afghan war cannot be properly represented by historians and scholars, but exclusively by people concerned. According to him, the narrative of a military involvement is a complex of reflections, observations, balanced judgements and defence’s arguments in favour of soldiers unfoundedly accused of having been immoral.²⁹⁴

Realistic writings would not be necessarily detached from sentimentalism, as in the illustrative documentary book by Svetlana Aleksievich, “Zinkovye malchiki”, “Zinc boys”, belonging to the “genre of voices”, giving much relevance to confessions and secrets of Soviet pilots, paratroopers, military doctors and advisers, and of mothers and wives who lost their loved ones.²⁹⁵

The result would be an ideological re-interpretation of the war, demonstrating that it was a mistake which deserves political and moral condemnations.

The need of an objective and factual image of the war publicly emerged over the last years, to better frame the present Russian identity, having a deeper knowledge of the past to better evaluate the complexity of interaction with different countries, like Afghanistan was, at social, domestic and international levels. Therefore, in conclusion, socio-ideological consequences of the Soviet-Afghan War survived until present day and the memoirs of military actions and emotive repercussions have been analysed over past to “correct” the present.

²⁹³ Daniel Korezkij, *Снасти посольство (Spasti posolstvo)* (Moscow: Ast, 2014).

²⁹⁴ Viktor Mirimskij, *Загадки афганской войны (Zagady afganskoj vojny)* (Moscow: Veche, 2006), 294.

²⁹⁵ Svetlana Aleksievich, “Ужаснись самому себе” (“Uzhasnis’ samomu sebe”), *Megapolic-ekspress*, no.14 (1991): 9.

4.3 Afghanistan, “graveyard of Empires?”

The war in Afghanistan was a crucial historic event, and as such it has been treated. The paramount importance would be associated to the collapse of the Soviet Union that would occur almost two years after the definitive withdrawal of the troops. The linkage comes naturally: the conflict in Afghanistan marked the beginning of the end of Soviet imperialism.²⁹⁶

This was an additional reason that labelled Afghanistan as a graveyard of empires. One of the myths associated with the Afghan country concerns the fact that it is almost unconquerable, due to the bravery of its inhabitants and the lie of the land, mountainous and characterised by harsh climate. Afghanistan is a country made up of thousands of small and isolated rural villages, populated by guerrilla combatants having full knowledge of their mountains and able to exploit it in their favour.²⁹⁷

Legend tells that the murderer of Alexander the Great was an Afghan archer and, therefore, that the end of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedonia could be attributable to Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the last two global empires, the British and Soviet ones, that attempted to militarily dominate Afghanistan, ended in disaster and were forced to pull out their troops.

The first encounter between British and Afghans happened between 1839 and 1842, during the First Afghan War, and concluded with the defeat of British troops and their departure from Kabul. The following Two and Third Afghan Wars suffered the same fate and in 1919 Britain was definitively driven out of Afghanistan, after having undergone several human losses.

The Soviet Union and its occupation of Afghanistan came up even against more obstacles that Britain did. 26,000 soldiers died in the battles fought against mujahidin that, thanks to their external Pakistani and American sources, managed to ambush the Soviet Army.

In reality, the Soviet superpower would not be directly crushed in the war, since, according to Soviet press and information spread, the withdrawal would be voluntarily implemented by Gorbachev and his bureau, once the “international duty”, the economic and military assistance had been sufficiently provided to Afghanistan and its civil society. The communist regime of Najibullah in the DRA was surviving, and the Afghan national reconciliation had been fulfilled; hence, the Soviet Union had no logics to garrison in Kabul.

Actually, the Afghan communist government survived after 1989, but just for a while; in 1992, right after the dissolution of the Soviet empire, it would be overthrown by Ahmad Shah Massoud who obliged Najiullah to resign, even due to the lack of funds and subsidies previously received by the Soviet Union itself.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Dina Mingalieva, “Афганистан - кладбище империй” (“Afghanistan – kladbiwe imperij”), *Rossiia Segodnya*, December 2, 2009.

²⁹⁷ Barry Neild, “Is Afghanistan really a ‘graveyard of empires’?”, *CNN*, December 7, 2009.

²⁹⁸ Max Boot, “Afghanistan – Graveyard of Empires?”, *Hoover Institution* 12 (March 1, 2014).

The results achieved by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan would not be as desired. Communism would disappear not only in DRA shortly thereafter, but even in the Soviet Union in its wholeness. Afghanistan, in the specific case of the USSR and its collapse, can properly and consequentially be defined a graveyard of the Soviet empire, since it strongly influenced the future of the Soviet Union. Economically and politically exhausted by ten years of tiring war and internally socially divided, USSR had to admit the obvious, that is the imminence of the disintegration into many independent ex-Soviet republics. In this sense, the war in Afghanistan presaged the end of an epoch, initiated in 1922 and which dramatically ended its existence in 1991.

4.3.1 Concrete post-Afghan war aftermaths in the USSR

The decision to withdraw, stated by Gorbachev, was the outcome of continual stances and Soviet positions regarding the matter. The Politburo was drifting, and two lines of thought arose: one that was in favour of the USSR retreat and the other that was opposed. Future development of Afghanistan would be dependent upon Soviet decision that, in turn, would allow or not to capitalise the relationship with the United States. The Kremlin, at the end, opted for signing the Geneva Accords, tacitly approving the “negative symmetry”, according to which it had to conclude its direct participation in Afghan domestic affairs, ending the long-lasting war. Reconciliation in Afghanistan, furthermore, had the implicit office of improving bilateral Soviet-American relations. Gorbachev hoped, and was almost convinced, that pushing to boost the agreements in Geneva between USSR and the Afghan leaders of the opposition and Pakistan, with the United Nations being a liaison, would run talks with the United States. Politically and ideologically, the Afghan problem was relegated to a subordinate issue, since the priority became the appeasement with the US. Therefore, after Gorbachev’s admonition to the Politburo not to violate the Geneva Accords and the assignation of the Afghanistan Commission to Aleksandr Iakovlev, who was the most liberal reformer within the Politburo, the withdrawal categorically began. It was part of the renewed political line, or, rather, the known Gorbachev’s New Political Thinking.

Despite the Soviet Army was leaving Afghanistan, Pakistan reneged on the agreement since it continued to provide weapons and assistance to mujahidin. Gorbachev’s reaction, however, would be directed towards diplomacy. In fact, as aforementioned, a concrete Soviet turnover, after having put an end to military pretensions in the Afghan war, would insist towards the path of cooperative co-existence of the two superpowers. Communist ideology, and the annexed Brezhnev Doctrine, were gradually replaced by less ideological and more diplomatic tenets.²⁹⁹

Gorbachev became very popular for his resolution, both domestically and internationally.

²⁹⁹ Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011), 148-150.

But, even if the Soviet Union complied with the obligations and abandoned any interest over Afghanistan, in spite of its good intentions, its own international reputation had been destroyed. The image of USSR as “peace-loving” could not persist, principally because of anti-Soviet propaganda diffused by the United States themselves, that led to the arising of anti-Soviet sentiments among communist parties and other countries of the Third World. Such criticism against the violent-defined USSR, would contribute to accentuate international Soviet isolation, that Gorbachev was trying hard to surmount.

The countless victims of the war, the addiction to drugs and alcohol of veterans, their psychological and physical wearing out were supplementary grounds to the deterioration of the *Rodina mat'* at domestic level. The thousands of young servicemen who died needlessly for a little Soviet gain and desire to exert influence abroad, left their relatives, and the whole community, in distress and contempt towards an egoistic motherland, unworthy of respect and confidence. Social domestic agitation increasingly intensified and support to the Soviet state and to communist dogma progressively broke.

The communist world, abroad, would be extremely affected by the weakening of the leader country that had always acted as guarantor; China, for example, adopted the free-market and decollectivised agriculture.

In spring 1989, just two months after the February withdrawal of the troops from Afghanistan, Gorbachev demanded the delegates to designate a date for the first elections of the Deputies for the renewed Congress of People. More than 90% of voting citizens participated and elected academics and professionals, rather than workers and farmers, differently from the precedent elections, dating back to 1918. The following step of the Soviet political metamorphosis was the television broadcasting of the initial session of the Congress in June 1989. Party meetings had never been opened to audience, whereas, under Gorbachev, political debates became of public domain.³⁰⁰

The trend in ideological-political field definitely arose already in the summer of 1989. It would follow a day-to-day proposition, meaning that judgments would be stated on a case by case basis. This approach was implemented and showed, for the first time, to face the miners' strike of June in that year, to whom the Soviet government proposed several palliatives, like, for example, the provision of consumer goods. Central communist ideology was deteriorating to make way for a slow democratisation process and the internal liberalisation. The answer to the strike, in this respect, would be the legalisation of the right to strike. Central state and authoritative decision-making process would be replaced by the devolution of higher powers to local soviets and

³⁰⁰ Robert Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse? Understanding Historical Change* (Armonk: ME Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 110-112, 128-129.

enterprises, even allowing a more flexible and permissible economic management. The lack of democracy would be lamented by the citizens of the different regions³⁰¹ of the USSR that, coming off an undesired and veiled war, were looking for a fairer leadership caring about the issue of its population. Democratic claims could be afforded by an internal splitting of the centralised power. By July 1990, at the 28th Party Congress, Soviet labour philosophy was explicitly not directed anymore to a unified vision of the republics joining the Soviet Union. Labour productivity and progress in the socio-economic area would not be achieved by a reintegration of the Leninist-Marxist principles, but a pragmatic-individualist approach was preferred. Efficiency in fulfilling state objectives would be progressively promoted to the detriment of equity; freedom and decentralisation of rule to single republics would replace centrality, that had always been the founding assumption of the Soviet Union.³⁰² In Eastern Europe, after 1989, communist regimes started to dissolve, notably due to Gorbachev's policies that encouraged nationalist movements and consented the fragmentation in the name of a higher self-management. However, the aftereffect would be more radical over communism in its entirety, considering that the ideological system would show signs of failing as well.

The Soviet civilian society responded positively to Gorbachev's wave of change. The war in Afghanistan, in fact, had strongly influenced social opinion that, as analysed, started to negatively judge Brezhnev's domineering attitude and, consequently, highly appreciated the granted autonomy.

The steered loss of ideological discipline, in the name of self-administration and individualism, promoted a political liberalisation. Indeed, in Gorbachev's view, *glasnost* would be a means to boost domestic productivity and to reinforce the economic apparatus. Nevertheless, the outcome would be the inverse. His attempt to rescue the Soviet Union from the troubles and complications accumulated during the last years, first of all due to the uncomfortable Afghan experience, would end in a desperate scheme of revitalisation of the stagnant economy. The costs of the war had drained Soviet economic resources for a long period of time and had been kept on rising more rapidly than the total defence expenditure. Only during the first seven years of the occupation, the Soviet Union spent almost 15 billions of roubles, despite the efforts to contain the costs. The provision of innovative and equipped ground and air forces, the production of artillery, the maintenance of the soldiers in situ and the organisation of the military operations depleted capitals and financial wealth.³⁰³ This was one of the more drastic consequence of the post-Afghan war

³⁰¹ D.N., "What Collapsed in the Soviet Union?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 45 (November 6, 1993): 2443-2444, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4400377>.

³⁰² Bobo Lo, *Soviet Labour Ideology and the Collapse of the State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000), 130-132.

³⁰³ Office of Soviet Analysis – CIA, "The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan: An Intelligence Assessment" (February 1987).

Soviet Union. The official gross national product continued to fall year by year; in 1991 it would fall by 10% with respect to 1989. The post-war economy quickly declined, and the stressors were of an exogenous nature. Trade with Eastern Europe reduced by 25%, strikes increased causing social-economic unrest, as the 1990 coal strike, and Soviet internal frictions, above all in the regional trade sector, deepened. Especially the latter aggravation was the concrete demonstration of people's growing refusal of communism, since many firms categorically disapproved state-imposed prices, being too low to favour their personal economic advancement.

Gorbachev's strict repression of inflation, distorting stimuli in the immediate post-war period, and the parallel partial liberalisation, undermining any economic policy promoted by the government, brought to disrupt the traditional Soviet economic functioning and to coordination problems.³⁰⁴

The General Secretary did not seem to be much interested in fulfilling the targets previous Soviet governments were addressed to. His primary objective was an internationalisation of the Soviet Union, possible to be achieved only through an improving of the relationship with the West. The arms race was de-escalated already during the war in Afghanistan and, if it was a wise move to invest in other fields, as in the consumer goods sector, it contemporaneously revealed to be gamble. Soviet population furtherly cut down its faith towards a foundational pillar of Soviet patriotism, that is the army. The Kremlin had appealed for decades to citizens to make financial and economic sacrifices in order to sustain the Red Army, and they had always listened to the pleas. The Afghan war, even for the people, had been a great privation and the Soviet defeat, accompanied by a drastic reduction of state resources destined to the artillery and to the corps, destabilised the civilians that did not recognise anymore themselves in a Soviet Union that had always behaved in a completely different way.³⁰⁵

The Afghan campaign, in a certain sense, damaged the mystical features of communism, getting it back to a mere political dimension. The uniformity of thought that had held off the population slowly disappeared, as an immediate impact of the disappointment caused by the unjustified and egoistic war, as complained by many of the people who sent letters to Soviet newspapers, as figured out in the previous chapter of this thesis.

In Central Asia, Islamism violently supplanted communism and radicalism critically threatened the security of the whole Soviet Union. Still today, Moscow is dealing with Islamic extremists, mainly from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who, infiltrating Russia, pose a serious treat for public security. And, as already mentioned, a decisive boost to the arising of the Islamic radicalisation

³⁰⁴ Andrei Shleifer and Robert W. Vishny, "Reversing the Soviet Economic Collapse," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 1991, no. 2 (1991): 341-346, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2534597>.

³⁰⁵ Charles Recknagel, "Afghanistan: Soviet Withdrawal Hastened Collapse of Communism," *RadioFreeEurope-RadioLiberty*, February 9, 1999.

within ex-Soviet Central Asian republics came from the American and Pakistan intervention in Afghanistan against the USSR and in support of the mujahidin.³⁰⁶

This series of domestic controversies, Gorbachev's hesitation in taking active decisions, social confusion about a Soviet Union that was radically changing and the more direct consequences of the war that spread death and poverty, deteriorated the decennial structure and organisation of the USSR to the point that in just two years it would collapse. On December 26, 1991 the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

4.4 Conclusion

The Soviet Union conducted a propaganda campaign to show the greatness and strength of its army and spirit, but if domestically it managed to convince the population, at least for the first years, the international counter-propaganda, promoted by the United States with the co-participation of Pakistan, would be as effective to seriously damage the image of the USSR and its founding principles. Being publicly accused of having violated explicit human rights and of having voluntarily caused the death of innocent civilians, the Soviet Union would gradually lose social and ideological consensus, not only among the enemies, or rather, the West, but even among friendly countries under communist regimes. Communism as binding element would disappear, partly even due to the spreading disillusion provoked by Soviet lasting behaviour in Afghanistan. The contribution of the American mass media and foreign press in general was fundamental to weaken the figure of the sympathetic and unselfish Soviet motherland; therefore, in this sense, the United States achieved a good result in the informative propagandistic war. The Soviet Union had to deal with a disappointed society that discovered the truth about what was happening near the Persian Gulf only after years of complete ignorance, during which it had to sacrifice itself, economically and humanly. If Gorbachev strained not to publicise the Soviet withdrawal as a military defeat, at ideological and civil level the consequences were harsher. The Soviet-Afghan War remained a shadow in the whole history of the USSR, and of modern Russia too. The linkage with the recent past and the desire of digging into the factual events of the decennium 1979-1989 are concrete preoccupations of today's ex-Soviet citizens that, not to forget and not to make forget, are continuing to write about that cryptic war, still tainted of secrets.

³⁰⁶ Recknagel, "Afghanistan: Soviet Withdrawal Hastened Collapse of Communism".

Conclusion

The Soviet-Afghan War lasted for about ten years. During the course of the term period, domestic political changes within the Soviet Union largely influenced the progress and outcome of the war itself. The behavioural transformation of the leadership undoubtedly caused ideological and social transformations that reflected on the propagandistic apparatus too.

The outcome of this dissertation highlighted the paramount importance of the propaganda as an instrumentalisation to achieve political goals. Information and news that had to be spread among the population were not casual, on the contrary they mirrored the bureaucratic leadership and its policy line. Retracing the steps of the Soviet-Afghan War, it emerged that the Soviet political propaganda faced two distinct and separate phases: from 1979 to 1985, when, in the apex of the military battle, the diffused information was almost void, and from 1986 to 1989, when the first afterthoughts about the continuation of the war arose and the propaganda opened to the circulation of actual and more truthful news. Therefore, propagandistic network was completely linked to the political reality of the Soviet Union, perfectly representing the ideology followed during a specific historic moment.

It has been functional to historically analyse the development and the change faced by the USSR during the years before the war, in the course of the war and at the end of the war, since it has been possible to deeply explore the opposition between the factual situation and the fictional representation of the situation. Until the mid to late '80s, the Soviet population was unaware about its motherland, domestic and foreign affairs; subsequently, thanks to a huge political transparency, the propaganda followed the same line of liberalisation.

It is important to underline that the exploiting of propagandistic channels as a means of mass communication to shape and mould an ideal and fitting political appearance was not only a Soviet prerogative; in fact, it was manipulated by Soviet adversaries, the mujahidin and the United States, for the inverse intent, that is undermining the USSR and its moves.

Analysing the decade immediately preceding the date of the Soviet invasion in Kabul, December 24, 1979, it emerged that the Cold War was experiencing a phase of relaxation and improvement of the bilateral and direct relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. General Secretary Brezhnev and President Nixon strained to reach agreements for the preservation of a peaceful global status quo, limiting the number of nuclear weapons in circulation and the ballistic missiles, in order to avoid the risk of a nuclear destructive war. Meetings between the two leaders increased and a further progression in the name of a friendly and collaborative co-existence of the two superpowers was made. Despite the several accords, as the SALT or the BPA, the presence of

different and antagonistic visions of the détente by the co-protagonists caused a series of misunderstandings and obstacles to the complete fulfilment of the envisaged reciprocal projects. The Soviet Union considered the maintaining of a good relationship with the United States as an imperative step to preserve the national security of the immense Soviet territory not to come to a nuclear war that would be catastrophic in all respects. The limitation imposed on the use of force was accepted by the USSR but implemented with some clauses. The naissance, or rather, the establishment and the devising of a specific doctrine addressed to the countries being active part of the Warsaw Pact, in a sense, justified the armed action if it was considered necessary to preserve the stability and to safeguard the safety of the state in question. The Brezhnev Doctrine, thought up by Brezhnev himself, as its name suggests, was a post-dated explication to the Soviet military intervention to put an end to the Prague Spring. In this regard, it was a retroactive excuse, but applicable in the future, whenever an analogous situation spread in a Soviet-allied state.

It was gradually extended to any country affiliated, for some reason, to the Soviet Union and to the communist ideology and, initially, it was used as a justification to the intrusion in Afghan domestic affairs.

Soviet political turnover, in the mid to late '70s, moved towards the Third World, even involving the territory of Afghanistan. The race for the influential supremacy, above all, from a philosophic-ideological side, did not disappear neither during the détente period; it was covered and not publicly claimed, but continued to be a critical element of struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States, whose hostilities were not solved.

Afghanistan was a strategical territory for a direct Soviet linkage with South Asia and the Persian Gulf and its internal political instability highly favoured the steady intromission of the USSR within Afghan domestic issues.

The attempts of the king Shah to liberalise Afghanistan during the late 1960s, through the promulgation of a constitution, allowed the building up of leftist and rightist parties, among which the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. It was a filo-communist political party, strictly tied to the CPSU, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that finally found an opening to penetrate within Afghanistan. Circumstances got better for the USSR after the coup d'état on 1978, bringing to power Mohammed Taraki, the General Secretary of the PDPA. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was born, and the government was dependent on the communist "mother", the Soviet Union. Thus, the USSR achieved its goal.

Collaborative incongruences began to arise since the beginning, because Taraki, not to show to the Afghan people the excessive Afghan submission to the USSR, departed from the official communist ideology, limiting the relations with the Soviet Union to a commercial cooperation to support the modernisation of infrastructures and mineral mines. The reciprocal trust, however,

furtherly weakened after the murderer and removal of Taraki by Hafizullah Amin. He radicalised communism in Afghanistan, even implementing political policies against members of the PDPA itself, imprisoning and killing them. The loss of control over Amin worried the Soviet Union that drastically opted for supplanting him, giving the power to Babrak Karmal.

The substitution was made possible only by the military action in Kabul, physically killing Karmal's predecessor in one night, acting secretly and without letting the Afghan population and the Soviet inhabitants know what was going on.

What was supposed to be a blitzkrieg, transformed into a lasting and tiring war, fought by the Soviet 40th Army and the Afghan state troops against the local counter-revolutionaries, Islamic extremists, that is the mujahidin, backed by the United States and Pakistan.

Brezhnev disregarded the significant presence of Muslims in Afghanistan, who did not positively and friendly welcomed the presence of a foreigner handling their country, judging the DRA as a puppet government, completely controlled by the USSR. Furthermore, communism did not belong to Afghan traditions and was considered as an imposition from the outside, whose principles, as for example the class struggle and the proletarian revolution, meant nothing for Afghan civilians. The war presented several difficulties for the Soviet soldiers. The mountainous areas were difficult to be conquered, both because they were arduous to be reached and because they were inhabited by the mujahidin that, besides knowing their zones very well, could boast the sustain and trust of the rural population.

In fact, the aforementioned surrounding status was one of the main reasons why the efforts of the Soviet Union were addressed towards the obtaining of a larger Afghan national popular consensus. The most rapid and effective means to persuade the people about the benevolence and altruistic purposes of the USSR was through propaganda. The distribution of leaflets, pamphlets, manifests undermining mujahidin, showing them as violent killers, who had destroyed houses, hospitals, schools, was a mere attempt of convincing the Afghan civilians that supporting the Soviet, and Afghan DRA, cause was the best possible option for the future of Afghanistan.

Therefore, Soviet propaganda was employed at Afghan level to gain the blessing of the Afghans and to deplete the strength of the mujahidin, reducing their popular general agreement.

Propaganda of the USSR was a precise and structured apparatus, constituted by an organised network of correspondents, journalists, cartoonists and experts who had the office of spreading news and information useful to build up a steered and superb political image of the Soviet Union. The aims of the propagandistic methods concerned the keeping of support and confidence towards the USSR, that employed the diffusion of informative materials as an additional and instrumental military strategy, looking for a higher material and concrete aid by civilians in the fight against the mujahidin.

At national level, meaning within the Soviet Union, the importance of propaganda was not of second-rate. Facing the USSR a period of economic stagnation and productive freeze, the risk of popular agitation became concrete. Not to worsen its position and not to have further problems, the initial Brezhnev's aspiration was to keep Soviet people quiet, without involving them in foreign affairs. This first phase of propaganda lasted for the first half of the war. From 1986, due to the metamorphosis of the Soviet Politburo, and of the General Secretary as well, propaganda faced a crucial shift, reflecting Gorbachev's political and multiple innovations. The opening of information concerning the war increased the attention given to society that, from that moment, was actively involved within political matters of its *Rodina mat'*. Freedom of expression, liberty of thought and higher relevance conceded to personal opinions and comments reconnected the citizens to the Soviet Union and vice versa, despite the increasing economic and financial crises, even due to the draining of resources to continue a heavy war, as the Soviet-Afghan one was.

The popular will displayed its interest in ending the war, despising the choice of invading made ten years before. Hence, the role of propaganda mutated in parallel with surrounding parameters, in the name of *glasnost'* and a government's affinity with the people.

In conclusion, the political perception of the USSR that was sensed by social individuals, independently if they lived within or outside the Soviet Union, was largely directed by the way the USSR sold itself, handling and accurately diffusing news finalised to the exhibition of a strong, altruistic, benevolent and peaceful state identity.

Propaganda did its job for the Soviet Union but to a limited extent, since it was harshly countered by the United States. In this regard, they responded with an equally organised anti-Soviet publicity and global indoctrination, whose consequences partly eroded the international reputation of the superpower USSR, that, already in 1989, started to show the first signs of its collapse as a cohesive and unitarian system, that effectively disintegrated in 1991.

Therefore, it is deducible that the Soviet-Afghan War was converted into an actual informative war aiming at sustaining and enhancing one's own political image, at the expense of the counterpart.

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Summary

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan happened on December 24, 1979 and initiated a long and gruelling war that ended in 1989. It was a founding episode during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, that, together with the Afghan state regular troops, the Islamic mujahidin and Pakistan, were the parties involved.

Consequences of the aforementioned war had a strong and relevant psychological impact over the population, whose link is still present today, mainly in Russia. The reason at the base of the cognitive and influential reactions was the huge employment of propaganda and channel of communications.

In this regard, the aim of this dissertation is to analyse the peculiarity of the Soviet-Afghan War that, beginning as an immediate aftereffect of the Soviet invasive offensive in Kabul, was transformed into an informative war, rather than a mere armed conflict. Soviet propagandistic actions are the main topic of interest, since, besides largely influencing the development and evolution of the struggle, they aimed at steering the political perception of the war itself, and, in a more generalised sense, of the Soviet Union as a political-ideological system.

The purpose of the named informative war was not only addressed towards the winning of the war in Afghanistan, but it involved further targets, perfectly amalgamated within the broader surrounding atmosphere of the Cold War. The lack of reciprocal trust and the Soviet-American race to the political supremacy were, in this sense, mirrored in the Afghan war, through a parallel war made up by disinformation and advertising.

The thesis examines the dominant and persuasive role of propaganda in the strengthening of the Soviet national and international position, handling the diffusion of news and information, regarding the military actions the Red Army implemented during the war. Leading to a favourable and positive political image was considered to be as a priority by the USSR and the struggle in Afghanistan became a real and actual stepping stone for the fulfilment of its intent.

The result of the analysis is a comprehensive perspective of the way the Soviet Union adopted to sell the Afghan War and of the immediate and more intrinsic outcomes deriving from such war of information. The employed methodology to explore the techniques and schemes of diffusion of news, regarding the situation in Afghanistan and the plausible scenario, presented during the propagandistic campaign, is based on a twofold approach: the historic and the socio-political perspective one.

First, in order to determine the background and the consecution of the events, the invasion in Afghanistan by the Soviet Union is introduced according to the historical chronological order, starting with the relaxation of relations between the USSR and the US. The existing literature has been explored to deeply understand Brezhnev's reasoning at the base of the decision of meddling in the Afghan domestic affairs, with the consequent re-deterioration of bilateral contacts with the United States over the 1980s.

Second, as the following step of the historical review, bilateral relations between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan itself are spotlighted, investigating on the precedents of the incursion, on the plans for the invasion and their putting into operation, on the expected results and the concrete ones.

Third, more concerning the socio-political approach, the internal-Soviet review of communication and propagandistic features and strategies are analysed, with the aim of showing that, and how, propaganda has become part of the Soviet military strategy in Afghanistan to intimidate the counter-revolutionaries mujahidin, and the way it continued to prospect a still going peaceful and serene living to Soviet people.

Fourth, the reasoning focuses on the American counter-propaganda and the effects it had over Soviet reputation, favouring its collapse in 1991.

The division of the chapters generally follows the methodological organisation.

The first chapter concerns the path towards the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, exploring the Soviet-American bilateral relations during the 1970s and the pursuit of *détente*. It is about the deployment of policies and agreements to reach an improved and friendly link between the USSR, under General Secretary Brezhnev, and the US, under the presidency of Nixon. The formulation of *détente* is a necessary step to be examined, since it gives the reader the perception of the polarised world during the years of the Cold War and of the instability and volatility of the achieved accords.

The period immediately preceding the 1970s, that is the mid-to-late 60s, embodied, worldwide, a term of raising hostilities. It had been a period dominated by major antagonisms, by the Chinese Cultural Revolution to re-examine the communist identity and by the Czechoslovak attempt to ease the Soviet Communism in force.

Insecurity, fear, instability and uneasiness reigned but they would sow the seeds for the forthcoming *détente*, initiated in August 1970, through the signing of a treaty upon the renunciation of the use of force between the Soviet Union and West Germany to grant the inviolability of borders in Eastern Europe.

Détente, in the vocabulary of international politics, means the cessation of a military tense atmosphere in inter-state relations for the purpose of open bilateral friendly correspondences.

In the framework of the Cold War, the term is referred to the period included between the end of the 1960s and 1979, year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, marking the conclusion of the “pacific rivalry” of Soviet Union and the United States.

In Soviet-American discourse, President Nixon was the first to make use of the word “détente” to describe his foreign policy, founding on comprehensive co-being and relaxation of frictions between the Soviet Union and the United States, focusing more on the importance of coexistence than on the aim of transformation. He inaugurated a “new era of international negotiations”. Substantially, Nixon declared that the United States could better reach their interests through negotiations, rather than confrontation, recognising in agreements themselves a fundamental role as stabilisers of international peace. The Nixon Doctrine attempted to demonstrate that the two superpowers, the US and the USSR, could collaborate and mutually fraternise, in order to continue being the strongest and most influent military powers but in a multipolar world, in which even smaller and weaker states could freely manoeuvre. Conflicts, the most of them, would occur in non-military spheres, in order to avoid a direct armed face-off, since, during an era of high nuclear vulnerability, the importance of negotiations and of the negotiating process itself became imperative.

Therefore, reconciliation with the Soviet Union was claimed in the name of an increase of self-security through negotiations, aimed at limiting the global possessed weapons in order to avoid a nuclear war. Despite the efforts of both the superpowers, the ten-year period of détente marked the impossibility of achieving a peaceful and disinterested cooperation. The reasons why collaboration was only partial can be identified in the ideological opposition, continuing to be a main element of struggle, especially for the Soviet Union. And linked to the centrality of defence of Soviet own beliefs, it could not be undervalued its desire for expansion. Soviet foreign policy began to be addressed towards the Third World, not really for concrete incentives, since, besides having found further trade partners, most of the states in question presented no exploitable economic or natural resources.

The most becoming example is Africa and Soviet propensity to intervene in local conflicts, just in order to exert more socialist influence.

Africa, Middle East, South Asia became the most favoured regions over which to extend the Soviet authority. Geographical proximity, strategical position, anti-imperialistic and anti-western sentiments coming from years of colonial submission, revealed to be fundamental pushes for increasing an overseas Soviet approach. The explication, becoming a sort of justification for Brezhnev’s aspiration of doctrinally conquering non-aligned states of the Third World, was found within the tenet taking his same name, the Brezhnev Doctrine. At ideological level, it gave a linear elucidation of the rationales leading USSR to mediate in foreign internal matters of the

aforementioned sides of the world. The bases of the aleatory and open-ended canon allowed to broaden its field of action over countries initially non-contemplated. At the beginning, the Brezhnev Doctrine had to act as a *post factum* alibi for Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Afterwards, it matured into a non-specific plea to legitimise any intercession in foreign issues, concerning the defence and preservation of socialist components or the prop to assist the development of communist revolutionary regimes.

This is the case of Afghanistan. Relations with the USSR and the invasion by the latter for the preservation of the communist mould in Afghanistan were the main and definitive cause for the breaking up of the détente and of the “convivial” Cold War. The doctrine partly gave an explication to the superficial impetus for occupying Afghanistan, in the light of an extensive turnover in the Soviet geopolitical objectives.

But, if the Soviet Union strived for a long time to achieve a peaceful co-existence with the United States, why, at the end, did it decide to crush the achieved results? Simply because expansionistic interests were considered superior than stability ones. The quasi-peace was in the name of personal safeguard, limiting the risk of a nuclear war and nothing more. The battle for ideological supremacy proceeded undisturbed.

The second chapter more deeply focuses on the close liaison of the Soviet Union with Afghanistan. The Afghan history has been pondered for the purpose of understanding why the USSR was largely interested in Afghanistan and in the preservation of the latter’s internal stability, and how the Soviets undetected infiltrated in the capital city Kabul.

It revealed to be crucial to pore over the Afghan past historical events before the incursion by the Soviet soldiers, to figure out the grounds behind the establishment of the communist regime, transforming Afghanistan from a monarchy into a democratic republic (DRA). The arising of anti-communist guerrillas and the naissance of Islamic radical rebels were judged as a threat to national Afghan security and to the government as well. Consequently, the Soviet Union intervened not to allow a political reversal.

During the 1970s, a link between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan was built up, or imposed, depending on the side of analysis. The question arises upon the reciprocal will and the reasons behind the behavioural attitudes of both viewpoints. A strong relationship was undoubtedly achieved, but the reasons, causes and consequences at the base could not have been shared nor exposed in a linear manner. Examining the historical background, the precedents of the Afghan internal situation and its weaknesses exploitable by the USSR, the result has been a three-dimensional picture, englobing concrete actions and ideological struggles, war operations and contradictions. The course of the historical events is a staging post to pave the way to a deep and further examination of the manner in which they have been sold, internally to USSR and

internationally. Showing the concreteness of how, when and why documented facts occurred is compulsory and antecedent to the research and review of the counterweighted Soviet political propaganda. To better understand its influential role, that has been analysed in the third chapter, it is required to deeply quote Afghan and Soviet intertwined histories between 1964 and 1989.

Afghanistan was a strategic territory for a direct Soviet linkage with South Asia and the Persian Gulf, and its internal political instability highly favoured the steady intromission of the USSR within Afghan domestic issues.

The attempts of the king Shah to liberalise Afghanistan during the late 1960s, through the promulgation of a constitution, allowed the building up of leftist and rightist parties, among which the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. It was a filo-communist political party, strictly tied to the CPSU, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that finally found an opening to penetrate within Afghanistan. The PDPA, almost immediately, internally split within two opposite factions, the Khalq and the Parcham: the first was less dependent upon the Soviet Union and more strongly managed to pervade the Afghan civil society, student and military classes; the latter was weaker and completely tied to the USSR.

Circumstances got better for the USSR after the coup d'état on 1978, bringing to power Mohammed Taraki, the General Secretary of the PDPA and chief leader of the Khalq faction.

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was born, and the government was dependent on the communist "mother", the Soviet Union. Thus, the USSR achieved its goal.

Collaborative incongruences began to arise since the beginning, because Taraki, not to show to the Afghan people the excessive Afghan submission to the USSR, departed from the official communist ideology, limiting the relations with the Soviet Union to a commercial cooperation to support the modernisation of infrastructures and mineral mines. The reciprocal trust, however, furtherly weakened after the murder and removal of Taraki by Hafizullah Amin. He radicalised communism in Afghanistan, even implementing political policies against members of the PDPA itself, or rather, imprisoning and killing the belonging members of the Parcham bloc. The loss of control over Amin worried the Soviet Union that drastically opted for supplanting him, giving the power to Babrak Karmal, the head of the Parchamis.

The substitution was made possible only by the military action in Kabul, physically killing Karmal's predecessor in one night, on December 24, 1979, acting secretly and without letting the Afghan population and the Soviet inhabitants know what was going on.

What was supposed to be a blitzkrieg transformed into a lasting and tiring war, fought by the Soviet 40th Army and the Afghan state troops against the local counter-revolutionaries, Islamic extremists, that is the mujahidin, backed by the United States and Pakistan.

The Soviet-Afghan War represented the apex and the lowest peak of bilateral relations with Afghanistan and, above all, the detachment of the communist DRA from Soviet communism.

It was the net demonstration that foreign impositions could not be durable, in spite of the Soviet efforts of disguising difficulties and showing a veiled reality. The USSR did not consider the close participation of the United States that, exploiting the offensive as a sign of Soviet disavowing towards détente and the maintenance of an international peaceful status quo, immediately backed the Islamic rebels. The erroneous self-perception the Soviet Union detained of its authority and strength that, according to its view, had to be shared and respected, was the main cause of the military failure during the decade 1979-1989.

Brezhnev disregarded the significant presence of Muslims in Afghanistan, who did not positively and friendly welcomed the presence of a foreigner handling their country, judging the DRA as a puppet government, completely controlled by the USSR. Furthermore, communism did not belong to Afghan traditions and was considered as an imposition from the outside, whose principles, as for example the class struggle and the proletarian revolution, meant nothing for Afghan civilians. The war presented several difficulties for the Soviet soldiers. The mountainous areas were problematic to be conquered, both because they were arduous to be reached and because they were inhabited by the mujahidin that, besides knowing their zones very well, could boast the sustain and trust of the rural population.

In fact, the aforementioned surrounding condition was one of the main reasons why the efforts of the Soviet Union were addressed towards the obtaining of a larger Afghan national popular consensus.

The most rapid and effective means to persuade the people about the benevolence and altruistic purposes of the USSR was through propaganda.

In this regard, the third chapter of this dissertation deals with the functioning of the Soviet propaganda apparatus and network.

The military Soviet-Afghan conflict between 1979 and 1989, although it remained at local level, was one of the most ideologised armed disputes. It epitomised the apex of the exacerbation of the political and ideological confrontation between the two antagonistic Soviet and American world systems and assumed the trait of a war unfolding on manifold fronts. Besides being canonically fought militarily, the fight became an authentic battle of information, rendering propaganda and communication means concrete elements of the war strategy. The fields of action embraced the military line, the economic, strategic, diplomatic and, especially, the mass communication spheres. Deliberative destructive influence, exerted by one of the counterparts, in this case by the Soviets, could contribute to the effectiveness of the military strategy, playing a part to undermine the authoritative strength of the enemy. USSR propagandistic apparatus strived to deepen internal

contradictions in Afghan units that, being shifted between state army and mujahidin forces, were running organisational and tactical difficulties.

The importance of propaganda and of its use within such ideological struggle played a fundamental role to build the desired Soviet image, with the aim of getting higher theoretical and efficient ascendancy to achieve the prearranged purposes. The main target of the propaganda activities was the providing of a single and shared ideologic impact among the population. The reality showed that Soviet media, above all central newspapers, did not totally reflect the factual truth.

The supportive network to be placed beside the Soviet Army in its armed face-off against mujahidin was not methodical, neither its working systems were in line with the Afghan issue, being oblivious and ignorant of the traditional and cultural surroundings. The internal media within the Soviet Union continued to exhibit a peaceful and stable scene, without any hint to the imminent military undertaking in Afghanistan. The population was not conscious about the foreign policy matters, in order not to ruffle the public opinion. Popular agitation and raising of questions could spark off controversies and polemics that were not functional to the blitzkrieg the Soviet Politburo had set to fight. The Central Committee of the USSR Politburo opted for covering up the international aid provided to Afghanistan; the media, in fact, did not mention the huge economic and financial support destined to the Third World's Islamic country. Furthermore, USSR financial system was not on the rise: economic stagnation and inadequate systems of transportation for consumer goods caused a reappearance of mass poverty. Therefore, the circulation of reporting around the funding destined to the Afghan DRA could originate popular agitations among a wretched population.

After the resolution of invading was taken and the military command was uttered by the Soviet leadership, at the end of December 1979, the newspaper *Pravda* denied the presence of the Soviet 40th Army over the Afghan soil, defining it as a mere invention. Rumours about an imminent garrison of troops in Afghanistan would be covered up until the fait accompli.

The strategy of the Soviet Union's propaganda within the motherland was radically addressed to the preservation of Soviet inhabitants, of their confidence and ideological belief towards the USSR, without running into perplexities, especially during a time period dominated by economic slackening and by a consequent stepping back in ideological consensus towards the communist leadership. The initial phase of the Soviet-Afghan War, coinciding with the arrangement and implementation of the invasion by the Soviet army, was characterised by a decisive denial and media disapproval of the USSR initiative of interfering within domestic affairs of the Afghan foreign country. So, the first days of the military intervention did not exist in the eyes of Soviet public.

The most evident propagandistic tendency, initially, was the hiding of military feats, replacing the report of dead, wounded soldiers, of the relentlessness of local Islamic rebels, and of part of the

Afghan population itself, against the permanence of Soviet troops, with images of bucolic living together. The convincement of Soviet citizens was made possible thanks to a strong censorship, obstructing any leak. The aspired task by the Soviet Union through the central propaganda was even to justify the multiple support granted to the DRA, rather than to defend it, persuading the masses of the goodwill of the Soviet leadership. Approximately 130 Soviet journalistic releases covered the situation in Afghanistan; none dealt with the contingent role of Soviet soldiers in the war. The headlines primarily spotlighted on the external aggression suffered by the DRA because of the mujahidin, on the financing of the war that entirely belonged to the DRA government itself, on the normalisation of the status quo thanks to the military ability of the Afghan army. The Soviet armed forces were depicted as humanitarian assistants, bringing economic and military aid to Afghanistan that was running into a crisis. They were named “vojn”, meaning warrior, or represented under the appellation of OKSV, the Russian acronym for the expression “limited contingent of Soviet troops”. It depended upon the aim of the Soviet newspaper. The first was more orotund and celebrative, employed to celebrate the heroism of combatants defending their motherland, often accompanied by the attribute “internationalist”; the latter was more neutral and chosen to widely refer to the Soviet military support.

Only at the end of 1984, the media began to admit that Soviet servicemen were dying at the hands of the rebel mujahidin. Media perseverated in insisting upon the worth and moral value of the Soviet soldiers that were bravely battling to support the Afghan society in its struggle against Islamic dissidents, raising them as heroes sacrificing their lives to save the allies' ones. The Soviet press kept limiting to report factual events in Afghanistan only in terms that could underline the advancement in bilateral cooperative relationship, emphasising the defence of the socialist DRA and the socio-economic reciprocal progresses. Occasionally, Soviet casualties were mentioned, but the attention of the readers was immediately shifted to the extolling of the camaraderie, the material values and the excitement of the military daily life for the Soviet soldiers. Besides the propensity to excite admiration for the Soviet servicemen, the propagandistic media, especially during the 1984, rather than deferring a broad reportage over the terrible conditions that were unnerving and wearying them, very often, after a word on the developments of the compatriots, preferred to direct the concentration over the victorious military strikes they were facing.

Until 1985, the coverage of the war in Afghanistan was well established and singularly coordinated in order to give all the blames and credits within the armed conflict to the DRA, paying no attention not to mention any invasive or armed attack guided by the Soviet Union. The aim was a sort of whole “Afghanisation” of the war.

Therefore, the propagandistic choices, during the first period of the war, were directed towards the Soviet leadership's utility, that is the concealing of the substantial expenses the Soviet Union had

to go to, in order to carry on the Afghan War. Avoiding social domestic challenges, through the appearance of an ongoing prosperous and pacific background, and persuading Afghan society about the friendship and collaboration between the two nations were the initial guiding principles of the “first propaganda”, 1979-1985.

On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Following his policy of *glasnost*, literally meaning publicity, public domain, whose contextual translation was naturalised into transparency, a series of changes became the active feature of these years. The General Secretary, plainly, declared that the Afghan war had not to be anymore fought by the Soviets. His foreign policy would be addressed towards a progressive strengthening of Afghan forces, in order to make them autonomous. Gorbachev's decline in the ideological support to the war would be the final jostle to release the media from the news blackout. After the 27th Party Congress from February 25 to March 6, 1986, the inclination towards a higher outspokenness and absence of reserve in the running of news by the media and the censorship was asserted. Troublesome and uncomfortable questions as the excessive bowdlerisation of information, the alcohol and drug abuse within the Soviet Union, the moral and ideological crisis, financial difficulties and foreign policy awkward matters started to be more openly tackled. The central press in Moscow soon adapted to the new policies.

Sometime later than the print media, Soviet radio and television tailored to the uncensored circulation and, from almost 1987, they started to diffuse interviews with Western political leaders, journalists and experts, extremely expanding the amount of live air programmes.

The year 1987 was inaugurated with an article by *Literaturnaya Gazeta* that directly broach the theme of the fire-war, deploring its excessive length.

Concomitantly, stories regarding the miserable treatment of the soldiers, both in Afghanistan and once back to Soviet Union, arose, accusing Soviet citizens and bureaucrats of not considering the *afgantsy*, that is the veterans who had fought in the Afghan war, as honoured guests. The human face of the Afghan war and the inadequate handling of the veterans became the core issues.

Furthermore, during the last years of the Soviet-Afghan war, central newspapers began to attach to the items some messages of the readers, complaining about the lack of an overall view of the war and about the telling the facts in a superficial way, almost disrespectful for those who were still fighting that battle and for the broken families.

In the eyes of Soviet citizens, after the “opening of the information” regarding the conflict, started to arise and spread the generalised and common thought that the USSR involvement in Afghanistan was a mere and unjustified matter of a political attempt of superiority, bringing no benefits to the *Rodina mat'*, and, on the contrary, only causing considerable social and financial damages.

The concession to the people of expressing their conjectures and viewpoints over the war, however, was a further strategy of the propaganda, that, adapting to Gorbachev's era, liberalised the information to move close the society to its belonging land.

The importance of the propaganda for the Soviet Union could not be limited to an additional element to win the war; it was an integral part of the war that, from the Soviet side, was fought even in this field. It had always been judged as a feature of social cohesion, of ideological defence, of military strength and, most of all, of political preservation.

Social co-participation within Soviet affairs, through the transmission of a more complete picture of the USSR procedures in place, manifesting to second and humour popular will, giving particular coverage to veterans and to the assessment they deserve, were the foundational standards of the "second propaganda", 1986-1989.

On the contrary, Soviet propaganda in situ, that is in Afghanistan, differently from the central-national one, was directed towards the necessity of persuading the local population that the USSR troops' stationing was the direct result of a specific request by the new leader Karmal, whose appointment was the accomplishment of a legitimate course. Citizens of Kabul, unaware of the organised military invasion and of the planning for the replacement of the DRA presidency, awakened and found a sudden change of the political scene, having no say. Soviet efforts, in order to avoid further civil insurrections, devoted to make their military garrisoning and active participation authorised and lawful.

The strategic zones of Kabul were full of bills and posters on the walls, stating that the Soviet Army was the defender of the working people, attempting to undermine the mujahidin and their violent acts consisting in the devastation of hospitals, schools and in the killing of civil and innocent people.

Thus, the choice of the most efficient propagandistic channel varied according to the recipient; different forms of communications were employed to achieve the same purpose, namely to shape a positive, strong and ideal political model of the Soviet Union, that was appreciated and admired by its friends and dreaded and respected by its enemies.

However, at the end, the Soviet communist machine of propaganda, in spite of having proved its efficacy and forcefulness within the Soviet Union and the USSR Army in the Afghan conflict, revealed not to be adequate and successful in affecting the worldwide public opinion.

The analysis of the Soviet propaganda during the 1980s, its essence and goals has been the core research to determine the political perception over the Soviet-Afghan War and to draw the conclusions concerning the specificity of the fulfilled results in the propagandistic confrontation.

The fourth chapter presents more in detail the counter-propaganda exerted by the United States and the national Afghan mujahidin, that contributed to change the political image the USSR had

strained to diffuse. Hence, while for the Soviet Union and for the correlated propagandistic network, the war in Afghanistan was a great success, internationally, the perspective fluctuated. The Soviet-Afghan War, independently from the singular perceptions attributed to it, concluded with the complete withdrawal of the Soviet troops in February 1989.

The United States, backing the Islamic mujahidin in their fight against the communist regime, recognised in the Soviet withdrawal a weakening of the USSR worldwide position and an important failure of the ideological and military schemes of the Soviet intentions.

The foreign perception about the Soviet-Afghan War did not necessarily coincide with the Soviet grasp of the subject and, especially, with its information warfare and censorship's guideline.

The international counter-propaganda, promoted by the United States with the co-participation of Pakistan, was effective to seriously damage the image of the USSR and its founding principles. Being publicly accused of having violated explicit human rights, employing chemical weapons, and of having voluntarily caused the death of innocent civilians, the Soviet Union gradually lost its social and ideological consensus, not only among the enemies, or rather, the West, but even among friendly countries under communist regimes. The contribution of the American mass media and foreign press in general was fundamental to weaken the figure of the sympathetic and unselfish Soviet motherland; therefore, in this sense, the United States achieved a good result in the informative propagandistic war. The Soviet Union had to deal with a disappointed society that discovered the truth about what was happening near the Persian Gulf only after years of complete ignorance, during which it had to sacrifice itself, economically and humanly. If Gorbachev strained not to publicise the Soviet withdrawal as a military defeat, at ideological and civil level the consequences were harsher. The Soviet-Afghan War remained a shadow in the whole history of the USSR, and of modern Russia too. The linkage with the recent past and the desire of digging into the factual events of the decennium 1979-1989 are concrete preoccupations of today's ex-Soviet citizens that, not to forget and not to make forget, are continuing to write about that cryptic war, still tainted of secrets.

The consequences of the Soviet-Afghan War were not limited to the specific case, but they became more generalised. Two years after the retreat, the Soviet Union would collapse. In 1991, it dissolved and split within self-governed and independent republics.

The conclusion of the research over the interdependence between the Soviet-Afghan War and the political propaganda for the achievement of a positive national and international reputation demonstrates that propaganda did its job for the Soviet Union but to a limited extent. The anti-Soviet publicity eroded the intent of the USSR, globally indoctrinating to an increasing of the anti-Soviet sentiment.

Afghanistan and the military involvement of the USSR co-participated in the following undermining of the unity of the Soviet Union in its ideological and political completeness, causing damage to its economy and social coherence that, shaking the stability of the cohesive system, favoured and brought to its collapse in 1991.